TSUKUMOJUKU
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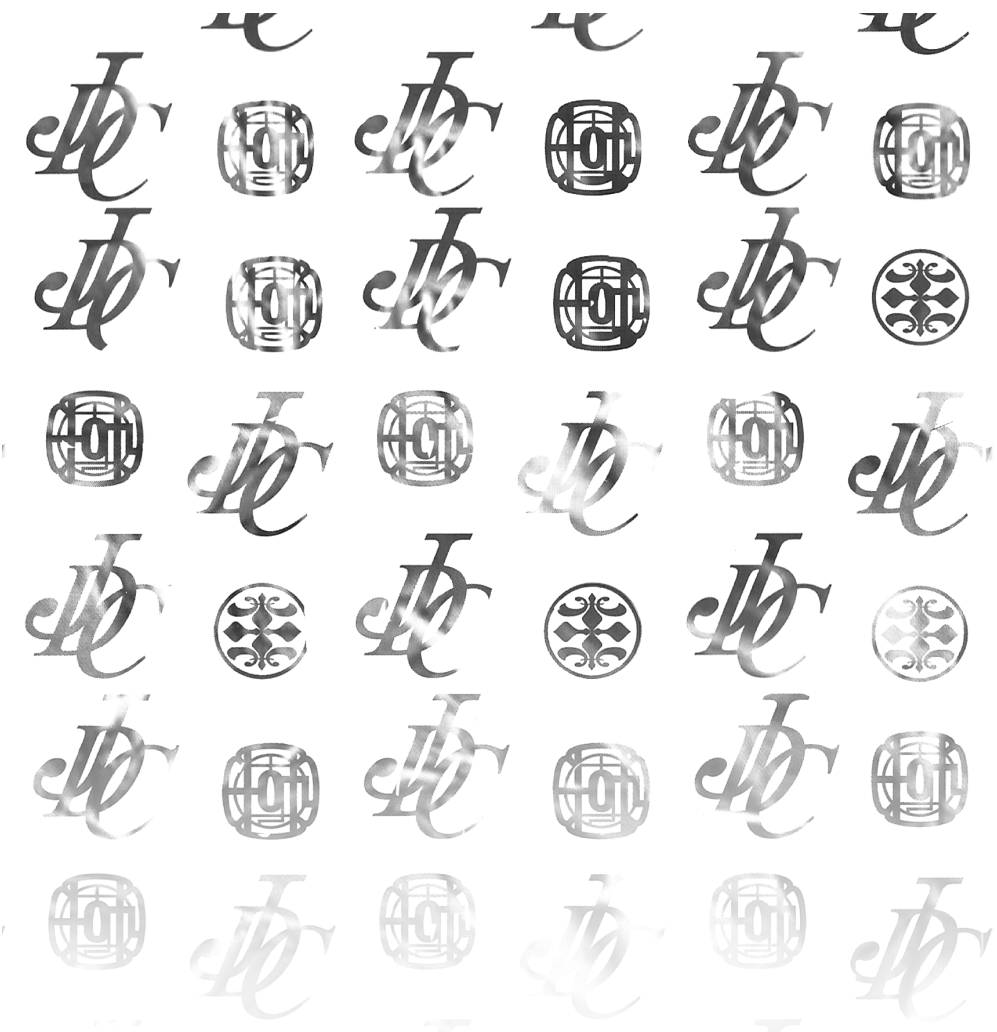
MAIJO OTARO



TSUKUMOJŪ

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MAIJO GANG-BANG O

Tsukumojuku

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Maijo Otaro

Translated by Hikiken (Sway Translations)

Translator's preface (optional):

As you have probably learned upon hearing of this book or picking it up, *Tsukumojuuku* was written as a tribute to Seiryouin Ryuusui's JDC Series in 2003. However, I assure you that it is entirely readable without any prior knowledge about the original series, which sadly isn't translated as of yet and might never be due to its nature. That's why I call this preface optional; you can either skip straight to Episode One and discover the series organically, or read the general run-down of the context, settings, and characters below to start on higher grounds. Rest assured, however, whichever you choose, there are no major spoilers to the original series to be found here.

Also, given the amount and range of information I have to convey in this preface, you might feel like my tangents are unwarranted at times, but please bear with me for a few pages; everything I say is in the spirit of enhancing your experience with *Tsukumojuuku*.

The JDC Series is composed of four major entries: *Cosmic: End-of-Century Detective Myth*, *Joker: Old-Testament Detective Myth*, the *Carnival* trilogy—composed of *Carnival Eve: Mankind's Greatest Case*, *Carnival: Mankind's Final Case*, and *Carnival Day: Anniversary of the New Mankind*—and *The Saimon Family Case*. The subtitles, number of books per entry, and reader order differ in the pocketbook reprints, but we'll use the original Kodansha Novels version as the default here.

The series started all the way back in 1993 when Seiryouin still belonged to the famous Kyoto University Mystery Club in the form of a few short stories included in the club's magazine. These stories are not publicly available, but we know that they developed the basic concept for a while until Seiryouin was confident enough to write a long-format entry and present it to the other members. That 700-page manuscript, which would later become *Joker*, was so outrageous it resulted in Seiryouin leaving the club. Three years later, after experiencing the Great Hanshin earthquake, he would write another full-length novel, *Cosmic*, and submit it to a brand new literary award run by the Kodansha Third Literary Publishing Department: the Mephisto Prize. Since the first winning work, Mori Hiroshi's *The*

Perfect Insider, had been selected internally (mostly for promotional purposes) and there was barely any advertisement that it was now open for submissions, it only received two works at that time. That being said, the way the Mephisto Prize works, the editors aren't obligated to name a winner every time they gather. Moreover, a debuting prize's first few works are the most crucial as they dictate the general direction the editorial team are following which in turn decides what kind of people and novels will enter any future editions, so the standards were still really high. Also, it doesn't actually come into play here due to the small number of initial submissions, but the Mephisto Prize is quite revolutionary among Japanese literary awards. It was the first one where editors read *all* the submitted works themselves, instead of having critics or authors doing a first pass and only selecting a few to be passed along to them. (Also it had no monetary prize; the only reward is the guarantee your book will be published.) That way, even the most problematic works can receive a fair appraisal whereas it could be rejected before even reaching the editorial team in another award; this played a big role in attracting ambitious upcoming writers of the era. Thanks to or despite this context, Seiryouin won the award and started his writing career. Upon its publication in 1996, *Cosmic* was called a "once-in-a-decade work" and a "scandal" by famous critics like Kasai Kiyoshi, Ootsuka Eiji, Azuma Hiroki, and Tamaki Saitou. It inspired a new generation of writers who would debut in the early 00's, most-notably composed of Maijo Otaro, Satou Yuuya, and Nisio Isin.

To promote these young talents and advertize the upcoming fourth entry to the JDC Series, *The Saimon Family Case*, the new editor-in-chief at Kodansha's Third Literary Department, Oota Katsushi, offered Nisio Isin and Maijo Otaro the chance to each write a tribute novel based on the series (Nisio ended up writing two, *Double Down Kangurou* and *Triple Play Sukeakurou*, due to their short lengths), while Ootsuka Eiji would script a tribute manga illustrated by Hashii Chizu, *Detective Ritual*.

Before we get into the actual contents of the series, I feel the need to say a few more words about Oota Katsushi so everyone can

understand how influential he has been in this sphere. 2003 was not only the year when he became the youngest person to be promoted editor-in-chief in Kodansha's 100 years of history, that also marked the debut of the literary magazine *Faust* for which he was the sole editor. Over the span of a few years, the magazine would become the number-one-selling literary magazine in Japan thanks to its cutting-edge sensibilities and young authorship, featuring names like Kadono Kouhei, Seiryouin Ryuusui, Nisio Isin, Maijo Otaro, Satou Yuuya, Nasu Kinoko, Ryuukishi07, Kitayama Takekuni, etc.—all of whom were, among others, edited by Oota even outside of the magazine when they published books via Kodansha Novels. In 2006, he also founded the Kodansha BOX label which published, among many others, Nasu Kinoko's *DDD*, Nisio Isin's Monogatari Series and Katanagatari Series, Maijo Otaro's *SPEEDBOY!*, and Ryuukishi07's *Higurashi* and *Umineko* novelizations. Later, in 2010, ending *Faust*'s publication and taking a step back from Kodansha proper, he became executive vice-president in the newly-created subsidiary, Seikaisha, where he is now the CEO.

The JDC Series depicts its namesake organization, the Japan Detective Club, confronting, through wordplay and meta reasoning in addition to traditional methods, large-scale revolutionary cases (called L-Cases, for Locked, Labyrinthic, Large), which often involve an unprecedented amount of victims. The queer nature of the solutions are justified by the multiple crime revolutions assailing the world after each unfolding L-Case (with The Saimon Family Case being the original one). The novels often employ mise en abyme, narrative tricks solely designed to trick the reader, diegetic discussions about other mystery novels, and plenty of other such elements wildly popular during the already-decade-old Japanese mystery novel renaissance that started in 1987 with Ayatsuji Yukito's *The Decagon House Murders*, but pushed to the limit of the absurd by Seiryouin. In addition to that, the detectives were each given a unique deduction method with a flashy name like you'd see in shounen manga. These methods range from Tsukumo Juuku's Divine Connection—named this way due his brain being seemingly wired to the truth of the world, to God,

revealing the solution to cases the moment he has gathered the required information—to Suzukaze Unomaru's house rules on the popular card name *Uno*, which have the effect to accelerate his brain and help him in his deductions whenever he plays it with friends.

These wild and diverse characters are neatly ranked within the JDC into seven sections and potentially moved every semester depending on their results during that period. Now, to "subtly" implant some of the names you might see later in this book , here are the names of the most notable detectives from section one and two, the cream of the crop: Ajiro Souji, Tsukumo Juuku, Yaiba Somahito, Shiranui Zenzou, Kirika Mai, Ryuuguu Jounosuke, Tsukumo Nemu, Hikimiya Yuuya, Amagi Hyouma, and Somedaring Amagoi. These detectives make for the majority of the series' main cast, with the readers following them through a third-person limited perspective frequently switching between them and other characters. The most central characters would arguably be Ryuuguu Jounosuke, a young, black-clad detective with a flexible brain and a particular affection—borderlining on obsession—for wordplays, and Tsukumo Juuku, an overly-beautiful young man who has to constantly wear sunglasses because anyone seeing his face might faint at his beauty. Ryuuguu is often the character we follow during the investigation process as he is a good vessel for Seiryouin to unravel his linguistic experiments with, while Tsukumo is always kept away from the investigation until late into the book for the simple reason that, if he wasn't, the book would end on the first page with him immediately naming the culprit.

In parallel to the JDC, there is an international detective organization, DOLL, which has its own ranking system of detectives ranging from F to S and operates worldwide, sometimes seeking help from the JDC. In the first volume of the series, *Cosmic*, Tsukumo is initially busy overseas helping DOLL with the investigation of London's Jackie the Ripper Case, while in Japan the Locked Room Lord has already started—since midnight on the first of January—to kill between three and four people a day in locked rooms, aiming for a total of 1200 within the year. During his stay there, he meets with a private detective, Inugami Yasha. (A young detective with white hair

whose ability, Insomniac Enlightenment, consists of staying awake for 90+ hours straight because the brain's activity allegedly increases after the 40 hour mark and peaks at around 90.) Inugami wishes for them to partner so he could have a crack at solving the toughest puzzle in the world: the inner-workings behind Tsukumo Juuku's Divine Connection.

Having mentioned his name so many times already, it's only fair to take a moment and explain some things concerning him. Seiryouin Ryuusui's Tsukumo Juuku—written with an alternation of nines and tens in Japanese (九十九十九)—was originally named Saimon Juuku but became an orphan during the Saimon Family Case, in which one member of the family was killed once a month for a period of 19 months. The only survivors were Juuku, his cousin Tsukumo Nemu, and Tsukumo Ranma who adopted Juuku before passing away a few years later. He was then picked up by one of the detectives present during the case, Ajiro Souji, who went on to found the JDC to subdue the crime revolution that originated with the Saimon Case. Across the series, Tsukumo would gain recognition worldwide and become the seventh S-ranked detective in DOLL. Maijo's book, however, isn't titled *Tsukumo Juuku*; Japanese doesn't use spaces in names, so both Tsukumo Juuku and Tsukumojuuku are technically equivalent, but there are reasons you will soon find out for this much-needed distinction.

As mentioned previously, one of the central features of Seiryouin's writing is his paranoiac use of mise en abyme, and the best way to illustrate that would be by explaining the nature of his multiple self-inserts showing up through the series. But first, to really understand how deep the well goes, you need to know that Seiryouin's real name is Kanai Hidetaka—a piece of information not indicated anywhere on the Kodansha Novels paperbacks. A key character to the series is the mystery writer Dakushoin Ryuusui (meaning 'muddy temple of the stagnant water,' a play on 'clear temple of the flowing water,' the meaning behind the 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' pen name) who is described as a highly-intelligent young, thin, glasses-wearing man with long dark hair. That's, as the reader can see on the author's picture present

in each book's inner cover, pretty much Seiryouin Ryuusui (the 'highly-intelligent' part being left to each reader's interpretation). In addition to that, Dakushoin's real name is Tamei Hidetaka, further reflecting reality. This far, the character sounds like a normal self-insert mystery writers love to include. However, that's thrown off by the presence of other self-inserts of many sorts. Mentioning only the most relevant ones, we have: a character usually referred to as Employee D whose real name is Kanai Hidetaka, a mysterious black cat named Kanaihidetaka (written like this because this name is meant to be one set), Saimon Ryuusui, Saimon Juuku's biological father, and Seiryouin Ryuusui, the pen name used by a mysterious author who publishes novelizations of "real-life cases" based on the JDC's reports and, as far as the reader knows, is pretty much a diegetic one-to-one of the JDC Series.

Although there is much more to say about the JDC Series, this brief course should hopefully cover any questions that might arise when reading *Tsukumojuuku* and allow for a deeper understanding of this tribute.

As always, it has been my pleasure to translate this book. I hope you'll enjoy your time with it.

Hikiken

Episode 1
9+9+9
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

Once through the birth canal and out of the uterus, I was so moved I sang “Hoona~♪,” which made the doctor and the nurse carrying me faint, leaving me hanging off the bed, only supported by the cord coming out of my belly button. My mother and everyone else remained unconscious for a while, so I spent about 30 minutes swaying back and forth; therefore my initial world had neither up, down, left, nor right. Only my singing existed.

“Hoolah~, fuuwah~, hoineeh~.” Bored of singing, I started observing the world (the maternity room)’s white floor/ceiling/walls, and eventually everyone awoke and stood up, starting with the nurse from earlier, who hurriedly lifted me upon finding me hanging. However, as the soft sensation of her arms made me happy, I laughed *nyaheeh*, causing her to faint once again and leave me hanging in the air. Left for another 15 minutes naked and covered in amniotic fluid, I caught a cold. While I was about to die from that cold, my father and mother and the doctor and the nurse all hesitated over whether they ought to leave me to die. A human capable of making others faint by singing, smiling, or laughing—well, by doing pretty much anything—is quite abnormal. Being too beautiful is a type of deformity. As my frightened parents were debating internally over whether they should kill me for my faults, I was kidnapped. This was my first ever kidnapping; carried out by the mother of the baby sleeping next to me. When she caught a glimpse of me, sparkling next to her own child, she instantly lifted me up and left the neonatal room, but then checked my face in the hallway and fainted. Another mother who saw me crying in the hallway undertook the second kidnapping but fainted before making it to the elevator. Yet another mother, who arrived from the elevator, couldn’t even so much as reach me with her arms before she fainted inside the elevator and was transported to another floor along with the other people inside who’d fainted too. The next mother made it to the stairs’ landing before fainting. After getting repeatedly kidnapped by 14 mothers who would kidnap me, move me, faint, kidnap me, move me, faint, over and over, I finally reached the

first floor's entrance, with the one who took me outside of the hospital ultimately being the nurse who had dropped me and left me hanging by my belly button's cord twice in the maternity room.

Suzuki Miwako. My precious Suzuki-kun.

Suzuki-kun had learned from when she'd dropped me twice in the maternity room, so she first off made me wear a woolen, adult-size hat, covered my face with a handkerchief, and made me suck on a nipple-shaped pacifier. With my face and mouth sealed, she was now safe from me and could return to her apartment in Kyoto, while paying extra care not to look at or think too much about the baby in her arms. Once there, she carefully scribbled over my face with lipstick then put me to sleep on her bed. Since I was on the brink of death, she fed me antibiotics, put me on an IV, and nursed me without allowing herself any amount of sleep; three days later, once my fever had gone down and I'd recovered, Suzuki-kun broke a thermometer in half and made me drink the mercury from it to destroy my singing voice. That was because, although my face was constantly camouflaged by the coating of lipstick, she couldn't suppress my voice forever with a mere pacifier. We'd had cases of me singing and making her faint when she was cooking, resulting in a small fire, or when she was carrying a hot kettle, which led to burns, but most important of all, apparently, me singing in the middle of the night pushed Suzuki-kun to the brink of death. After crossing a Sanzu River-looking stream many times and repeatedly seeing her life flash in front of her eyes, on a certain morning when she had an out-of-body experience and floated up to her bedroom's ceiling, unable to return to her sleeping body—which she only managed to regain and wake up after much struggle thanks to a weird old man's ghost helping her out—Suzuki-kun set on putting an end to my singing.

It was painful when the mercury passed through and burned my throat, but I had no qualms with losing my singing voice in itself. Being a baby who couldn't yet control how it expressed its emotions of joy, I was glad not to have Suzuki-kun fall over at every sound I made. If I saw her bringing me milk, I would sing "Mawla～nya～♪," making her faint, and ultimately go hungry because I didn't get the milk; we

couldn't let that keep happening. With the mercury ingested and my singing gone, I could now be fed milk regularly. Milk was more important for babies. *Shuck*, *shuck*, I drank milk and made my cheeks already colored red by the lipstick even redder. Hurray for milk! The milk Suzuki-kun would prepare could be burning hot, lukewarm, strong, or watery; of a workmanship unimaginable for someone working in a maternity ward. Nevertheless, it was always delicious. I drank any kind of milk with a big smile. Suzuki-kun would adorn a mixed expression when looking at me. A blend of joy, sadness, misery, and distress...

Suzuki-kun was still 19 years old; she was tall, had short hair, a thin neck, small shoulders, plentiful breasts, long limbs, slender arms and thighs, and was apparently popular with men, as seen by the multitude who would pay her visits; some would be shocked upon finding me and run away immediately, while others would hang in, remain, and lay naked in bed with Suzuki-kun. Only Katou Junichi-kun, who worked part-time at a bar Suzuki-kun often frequented, came back multiple times to our home. Katou-kun was quite a bit shorter than Suzuki-kun, and yet Suzuki-kun would sometimes cling onto that short-built man for a long time. On rare occasions, Katou-kun would prepare me milk of a taste and quality so exquisite it made me want to never again drink the one Suzuki-kun provided me with, but my next milk would always be Suzuki-kun's, so I simply drank it as usual. As a general rule, I liked any kind of milk.

And so, a while after arriving at Suzuki-kun's domicile and getting fed milk to my heart's content, about when I started sleeping through my nights, I noticed Suzuki-kun's stomach growing in size until it became round, then apparently a baby came out of it; a second bed was set up next to mine, and in it was put to sleep the newly-born Daibakushou Curry. Naturally, he didn't yet go by the name 'Daibakushou Curry' at the time, he was simply 'Suzuki Tsutomu,' but Tsutomu had that face saying 'Ta-da~h, look at me, I'm the shiny Daibakushou Curry' ever since he was a baby; he was an odd one. My cute and odd little brother Tsutomu. However, Tsutomu's appearance spelled a big change in my life. Suzuki-kun resented the fact that she

was more enamored with someone else's child that she'd kidnapped from her workplace than with her own child who had come out of her womb. Suzuki-kun was probably too committed to me. Despite having fainted, gotten injured, and gotten nearly killed because of me, she must have found herself engulfed and imprisoned by her love for me as she continued taking care of me. Even her desperate attempt at liberating herself from that—getting pregnant, giving birth, and obtaining her own child—proved futile before the diabolical love she held towards me. Indeed. When love sees the act of overcoming pain becoming trivial and automatic, it grows diabolical. No one can escape from such a love. Therefore, if one has any intent/possibility/consideration/choice of escaping from a love full of suffering, it would be wisest to not let it stretch over a long period of time. If suffering is involved, one should give up on that love and search for another partner. There are many people one would want to cover with love in this world.

If it means suffering, I don't need to be loved.

After routinely punching me, kicking me, dropping me, not feeding me milk, neglecting changing my diapers, and agonizing over her diabolical affection for me, Suzuki-kun decided to slice my right ear off. Since my crying face was cute, Suzuki-kun then sliced my nose off. Since the glint in my eyes staring at her while I wailed looked more dazzling than any jewel, Suzuki-kun then gouged both of my eyes out with a spoon.

Suzuki-kun, however, didn't kill me.

She couldn't kill me.

Slicing one of my ears and my nose off before gouging out both my eyes might have been diabolical, but these actions stemmed from love nevertheless. With her still held captive by her love, there was no way she could kill me.

Suzuki-kun applied gauze on my right ear, my nose, and my eye sockets, then hugged me tight. Even then, she still had the knife she'd used to slice my ear and nose off in hand and was brimming with intent to kill me, but felt conflicted at her incapability to do so. The knife was quivering. She put more strength into her hug and grabbed

the knife more firmly as she kept crying; I, however, stopped crying pretty quickly. I had actually foreseen the yet-undecided result of her current emotional conflict: **Suzuki-kun couldn't kill me.** Therefore, I was at ease. So much that I vainly closed the eyelids on my eyes devoid of eyeballs and fell asleep. I felt so much at ease that I fell into a deep, deep slumber inside the strong embrace of that woman who loved me so fiercely. Shedding blood from where my eyes, ear, and nose previously were. Deeply. Deeply. Calmly. Yet, I can't imagine that I was able to dream.

I had never dreamed.

As I was in this deep, deep, dreamless sleep, Katou-kun came home and took me to the hospital along with a Ziploc bag containing my eyes, right ear, and nose. The doctors immediately started operating on me to connect back the severed nerves of my eyes. Thus returned my eyeballs inside my eye sockets. However, only my right eye fully recovered. For some reason, my left eye perceived the world in a black and white monotone. My right ear and nose were full of stitching scars and it would take much more time and many more operations for them to return to normal. Still, for the time being, I was content with that state. The people around me must have felt similarly too. At the very least, nobody fainted upon seeing my face while my eyes and ears and nose were covered by bandages or when they had apparent scars. However, when the stitches were removed and the scars started healing after one or two months, the doctors and nurses started going down at my every smile yet again. People scheming to kidnap my scarred body once again began to show up. Were Katou-kun not there to protect me, I might have yet again ended up in someone else's house and had my ears and nose sliced off and my eyes scooped out due to diabolical love. Or maybe both arms plucked, both legs lopped, and my belly sliced open; injured just enough not to die. It was all thanks to Katou-kun that I was let off with that one instance of agony orchestrated by Suzuki-kun. One doesn't need to experience having their right ear sliced off, then their nose, and finally having their eyes scooped with a spoon one after the other more than once.

Suzuki-kun was admitted to a female prison in Kyoto, so it was

decided Katou-kun would take me and Tsutomu with him to his parents' home in West Akatsuki, Fukui Prefecture.

Katou Hikoemon's house was the edge-most building of a settlement called Hiimagotani in the Tanokura District, east of West Akatsuki; inside that pretty, two-floor, newly-reconstructed house lived the couple Heisuke-san and Shiono-san, their eldest son Takashi-san with his wife Junko-san, and the twin brother and sister Seshiru and Serika. Despite his little brother suddenly coming back with two babies in hand, Takashi-san drove to the train station to pick us up and welcomed us with a warm smile. Still, his complexion changed completely when he witnessed me, as expected. Takashi-san's knees abruptly fell onto the concrete floor before the ticket gate, he faced the sky, and declared, "Aah, so my Lord has descended upon us." That was incidentally a prophecy hinting at me later becoming the God of Detectives. Takashi-san then asked Katou-kun for my name. Katou-kun started by telling him Tsutomu's name, but he couldn't do the same with me. Not because he wanted to keep it a secret; simply because at the time, the fourteen-month-old baby still unable to even stand up that I was didn't have a name. Indeed, Suzuki-kun hadn't bestowed me with any legitimate name. She generally used three names at random to refer to me. Sometimes she would use 'Tolerant.' Other times she would use 'Sincere.' And with an equal frequency she would use 'Honest.' That came from Suzuki-kun's philosophy that being tolerant, sincere, and honest was the most important thing in the world, so Katou-kun always used the long name 'Tolerant Sincere Honest' when calling me. But that was pretty weird, so as soon as we arrived at the Katous' house in West Akatsuki and put our baggage down, a reunion to decide on my name was held. However, the name everyone settled upon after much reflection was a lot weirder than 'Tolerant,' 'Sincere,' 'Honest,' or even 'Tolerant Sincere Honest:' Tsukumojuuku. Written 九十九十九, an alternation of nines and tens. That is my first name. After getting adopted by the Katous I became Katou Tsukumojuuku. Tsutomu was inscribed as Suzuki-kun's eldest son in his family register so he remained Suzuki Tsutomu.

2

The Katous' house, which had been renovated in the Autumn three years before we landed in West Akatsuki, had a basement with two bedrooms, a toilet, and a bathroom, which was barely used; so Katou-kun, Tsutomu, and I occupied it. However, ever since that night when we came from Kyoto to Fukui on the Express Kaetsu 13, barged into the Katous' house in West Akatsuki, and decided on my name, only Katou-kun and Tsutomu ever left and visited the upper floors; I was confined to that windowless basement for the whole duration. But there was no avoiding that state. Being too beautiful, I would make the people looking at me faint. Moreover, there was no shortage of people scheming to kidnap me; if another Suzuki-kun were to get a hold of me, they would let loose their love full of sliced ears, sliced noses, and scooped eyeballs. Sealing me inside that basement meant protecting both the outside world and me. I wasn't dissatisfied with that state of being. I had a bed, a bathroom, and received three meals a day, so I didn't mind being unable to gaze out of a window while eating. Fluorescent lamps would illuminate the path for me as I made my way between the bed, bathroom, and toilet, so I didn't mind not having sunlight. The countless books on the shelf situated next to my bed would teach me words and the television next to the bookshelf would teach me about various colors, sounds, and voices, so I didn't mind not experiencing the outside world. For me, who had learned of the world through television, at first, the world was split into two for a while; one side being live filming, and the other being made out of anime. I thought both worlds were being invaded by kaiju and robots and aliens and apostles, and everyone was fighting here and there, but Katou-kun would point out the discrepancies between my cognition and the actual world, so I didn't mind. What I did mind, however, was that when I'd turned eight after experiencing an education wholly different from other children while inside that basement, and Seshiru and Serika had both turned ten, they began regarding me as something akin to an animal or a plant and started domesticating me.

Seshiru and Serika had already begun creating their own illusory

world by then. In their rooms, which I'd never visited, was an immensely thick file titled The Sacred World; inside it were compiled various memos, illustrations, pictures, and even cut-out parts from books or magazines, all representing the world they had built. Seshiru and Serika started their world's creation by constructing their Castle of Illusions. That castle was stuffed with labyrinths, traps, and secret passages/rooms, and was more akin to a chimera composed of colossal animals than a castle. In case anyone Seshiru and Serika didn't like were to infiltrate it or happened to dampen their mood, the Castle of Illusions was capable of executing them on the spot with its pitfalls, guillotines, automatic torture devices, ghosts, and mysterious preying beasts installed here and there. At a snap of either's fingers, the floor would promptly open up and make the offender fall into the dark underground world; or mechanical arms would extend from the walls, capture them, install them on a guillotine, then make their head fly; or spin them on a gyrating machine until their organs spilled out; or bind them to a compressing machine that would fold them a hundred times; or have ghosts or beasts jump out from behind the curtains and kill them in various ways. Seshiru and Serika also kept a Killing List containing everyone but them. The contents of the list didn't indicate the names of who they should kill, but rather how many times and in which ways one was to be killed. Their classmates were to be executed seven times at a minimum and 135 times at most. And, for instance, their homeroom teacher from third grade was to be killed by having a guillotine shred him from head to toe in cabbage-like slices a thousand times before hitting him a million times with a giant iron hammer and then making a big insect lay a hundred million eggs inside his body. Such was Seshiru and Serika's dark imagination. They were even set on killing both their parents, Takashi-san and Junko-san, once each. The siblings had written they would inject them with drugs to kill them gently, then bury their corpses inside the soil serving as the castle's foundation. In other words, the Castle of Illusions would be built upon their parents' corpses. The Castle of Illusions—their weapon to win this war of two vs. the world. The role they had chosen for me was 'a pet they'd found in the castle's

catacombs and successfully tamed.'

They first prepared a bag to cover up my head—it was the yellow drawstring pouch for the baseball glove Seshiru had received upon entering elementary school but ended up barely using. After Seshiru opened holes in it with scissors, they suddenly barged into our room in the basement and put it on my head. The holes were perfectly aligned with my eyes, so I could see outside it. I could see Seshiru and Serika smiling before me. "Should be good 'nough. With that we can look at ya just fine," they laughed; Seshiru and Serika were plainly beautiful children. They were well-featured and had shockingly clear skin. Takashi-san and Junko-san were pretty well-featured too, but the beauty of these two felt like their parents' were added together, polished, then further refined. At this very moment, Seshiru and Serika, who were smiling at my pouch-covered head, were radiating more charm than ever before, with an almost divine prestige. Though not enough to make one faint. These two had probably built their identity in full awareness of their good looks. They had grown up with those around them calling them cute, pretty, and beautiful. They also had good grades at school, excelled in sports, and were accustomed to speaking in front of others, so others saw them as 'perfect children;' at some point, that outlook prevailed over how they viewed themselves. So when they saw me, someone surpassing them at least in looks, they must have felt an imminent danger threatening their footing. They feared that the ego they'd built from other people's gazes out of immaturity would shatter because of me. I understood that. I'd even predicted that Seshiru and Serika would storm on me like so. They were still young children fervent to protect their own world. On my first night here, I had made the three-year-old Seshiru and Serika faint and sprawl onto the floor. When I saw their faces turn red as they escaped into their room upon waking up from that miserable experience, I already knew things would turn out this way. They had already become this house's prince and princess by that point. They couldn't ignore me after I'd made them faint. And the day had finally come. Starting with a pouch, eh. To hide my face, naturally. Then they would surely take their time tormenting me. And indeed they

did. Each of them plunged their fingers into one of the pouch's holes and took out my eyeballs, which Suzuki-kun had once gouged out. Serika said, "Gweeh. Twas true~, his eyeballs come off," and laughed her heart out. Seshiru and Serika each had one of my eyeballs resting atop the palms of their hands. Tsutomu, who was reading a picture book on the bed next to mine, started wailing upon seeing that scene. "Shaddup, clown!" Seshiru said, kicking Tsutomu and sending him rolling off the bed. He was now crying and panicking on the floor. "Are you okay, Tsutomu?" I asked him. "Onii-cha~n," he said, still in tears, stood up, and tried to return to me. But Seshiru gave him another kick, putting him back onto the floor. He started bawling harder. There was no one else in the house then, so nobody came to our rescue.

When I told them, "Give those back," Seshiru replied with, "As if ya needed that to see us."

He wasn't wrong. I could see them. I had lived in this one room continuously for seven years, so I had a total grasp on the position of the beds, the tables, the bookshelves, the TV set, the closet, and the garbage bin.

I extended my hands to grab the eyeballs lying on Seshiru and Serika's palms, but they swiftly raised their hands upon noticing my intent. They were both much taller than me, which left me with no way to get my eyes back. I looked at them in silence.

"Welp, if ya want your eyes back, start following our orders," Seshiru said.

"If ya do that we'll give them back," Serika said too.

"Sure. What do you want?" I asked.

"It's simple, become our pet. We'll be your owners," Seshiru answered.

I see, I thought. Even someone whose sole pride is their towering height wouldn't feel jealous of giraffes. Even someone whose sole pride is in their running speed wouldn't feel vexed upon seeing a cheetah. Seshiru and Serika had decided to digest their ire towards me by removing me from the domain of Humans.

"Sure," I said.

I wanted my eyeballs back. I didn't want Tsutomu to feel scared any longer. I wanted Seshiru and Serika to leave this basement which belonged to Tsutomu and Katou-kun and me as soon as possible.

"Aight, then be sure to obey anything we say, 'kay?"

"Of course."

"Be sure to put that bag on when we come down here."

"Okay, got it."

"Also don't tell anyone about this. If mom or dad learn about it, you're dead."

"Sure."

"Hey, that goes for you too, Tsutomu, don't you dare run your mouth."

Despite his extravagant wails, Tsutomu managed to nod.

"Aight, here ya go," Seshiru lowered his arm and opened his hand, presenting me with my eyeball. I accepted it and inserted it through the pouch's hole inside my eye socket. Left eye retrieved. Serika did the same and presented me with my other eyeball. I accepted it too and inserted it between my eyelids again. Right eye retrieved. With both eyes back, I hung my head for a bit and endured the stinging sensation in the back of my sockets. After a while, the nerve connecting the eyes to the brain started working again and I regained the ability to see. Having retrieved my light, I saw Seshiru and Serika off and removed the pouch from my head. Tsutomu rushed to me while sobbing and calling for me.

Tsutomu was the only one who didn't faint upon seeing me.

I told him, "Tsutomu, Seshiru and Serika will start coming here every now and then, so please go upstairs when they do. There's no telling what they might do to you if you stay around. Also, don't say anything to the people upstairs. Don't cry and stay calm."

Tsutomu kept sobbing, so it took a while to get him to agree.

Seshiru and Serika started treating me like their pet the very next day.

They didn't treat me like a slave or cattle, but genuinely as their pet. They made me wear that yellow pouch and spoiled me. Now that I had been demoted to the rank of pet, they could be honest and spoil me as much as my excessive beauty urged them to. However, they each spoiled me in different ways. Seshiru patted, rubbed, and squeezed my body all over. He made me mimic cat or dog noises and blasted his high-pitched laughter around as we frolicked around on the bed or the floor. When he got tired after playing with me, he would sometimes rest his head on my stomach and fall asleep. Serika didn't pamper me like Seshiru did. She disciplined me. When I was with Serika I could stand normally instead of crawling on all fours or rolling onto the floor. Moreover, she didn't want me to cry 'woof woof' or 'meow meow' or 'screeee,' and let me speak normal Japanese. But I was not to laugh in her presence. I had to straighten my back, keep my fingers straight, and tuck my chin in. When Serika found me slacking even a little, breaking my posture, or doing something she didn't like, she had to punish me. Only Serika punished me. She would pull down my pants and underwear and pull on my genitalia really strongly. Sometimes she would grab scissors or knives and wield them near my genitalia's base to threaten me or grab a needle and actually prick at the skin surrounding the tip of my genitalia. Having my genitals stabbed with a needle or chopped off like how my eyeballs were gouged out would have been unpleasant, so I always apologized to Serika and corrected my mistakes. She even forbade me from speaking in the Fukui dialect. She hated how 'ya' sounded and such, so every time I let some Fukui dialect slip she would bonk my pouch-wrapped head pretty strongly.

Their ways of spoiling me were so different it was rare for both of them to visit me at the same time.

One day, Seshiru snatched the yellow pouch from my head, went upstairs, and came back with green, triangular ears cut from felt attached onto it. After making me put it back on, he said, "From now on ya can't speak Japanese, 'kay?" I asked him, "What language

should I speak, then?" so he hit me in the head, said, "Hey, I said no Japanese," and added, "So now ya cry 'elgug.'" "Elgug." "Good. Keep it up. Ya can't say anything but elgug, got it?" "Elgug elgug." "Exactly. Oh, also, we came up with a name for you with Serika." "Elgug?" "Your name's Gajobun, okay? Gajobun is a Gajoon, one of the monsters living under the castle we live in, but ya're not evil so we got you out and made you our pet." "Elgug." "Aight, I brought you a ball, Gajobun." Seshiru threw a tennis ball so I chased it. I returned to him with the 'tennis ball I love so much' in my mouth, and shook my butt for lack of a tail. Once I'd dropped the tennis ball on the palm of his hand, Seshiru said, "Good boy Gajobun, very good boy," and patted my head through the pouch that now had ears attached onto it. I shook my butt more rapidly and said, "Elgug, elgug." He threw the tennis ball somewhere else in the room...

Although they had agreed on the 'Gajobun being a Gajoon' point, Serika didn't know about the 'Elgug' cry nor about the green ears, so she left me alone with the yellow pouch and its green ears and ran upstairs, yelling "Hey! Seshiru!" I heard them argue for some time, followed by silence, and even later Serika coming back down with Seshiru's gym clothes bag. That gym bag had its handles cut off and two holes cut in it; she made me remove the eared pouch and put that on instead. It didn't have ears. Serika said, "Okay, this is better," but I was pretty sure there was a name tag saying '5th Year Katou Seshiru' pasted on the back of my head. I naturally didn't mind. Serika called me 'Gajobun' too and made me talk in 'fluent' standard Japanese about the Castle of Illusions' latest news:' "Say, Gajobun, how has behavior in the underground land been lately?" "The Gajoons are all living in peace." "We haven't been sending down as many criminals as of late, are you fine?" "We are." "Still, we will send you some more. There should be a sizable increase in the amount of annoying people we come across soon enough. You may kill and devour all of them." "Understood" "Where is your 'thank you'?" "Thank you very much" Etc.

When I turned 11 and Seshiru and Serika turned 13, their ways of spoiling me changed yet again.

Seshiru started to make me lick his genitalia and inserted it inside my anus. On the other hand, Serika licked my genitalia and made me insert it inside her anus. Since then, Seshiru—who used to pat and rub me gently—grew violent and started punching and kicking me while Serika did the opposite, cutting short the physical punishment and instead started caressing my shoulders and resting her hands on my lap.

On a certain Sunday, at noon, Seshiru came down to our underground room. Tsutomu, who was around by lack of chance during that time, got surprised by the knock on the door. Tsutomu and I concealed our breaths until we heard, “It’s Seshiru,” said from beyond the door. I then put the yellow pouch with green ears on and said, “Elgug.” The door opened. Tsutomu made to switch with Seshiru and leave the room, but Seshiru kicked Tsutomu’s butt. “Moron! Can’t ya hurry up!” Tsutomu ran up the stairs. Seshiru closed the door. He turned the lights off to signal what was about to happen. I turned on the table lamp next to the bed as usual. I put Seshiru’s genitalia inside my mouth. However, Seshiru then said something unusual: “Gajobun, get on your feet.” I removed Seshiru’s genitalia from my mouth and stood up. He then asked, “How’s your thing down there right now?” and touched my genitalia. It was in its normal state. He asked, “Ya don’t get a hard on when doing that?” and rubbed it strongly. He then stared into my eyes through the pouch and said, “Hey, take your eyes out.” I obeyed, plunging my fingers through the holes and taking both of my eyeballs out. Seshiru got on his knees, brought his face near my crotch, opened my zipper, took my genitalia out, and started licking it. It made me recall Serika. His technique was different from hers. Seshiru was violent and sometimes his teeth would hit it. He was breathing roughly from his nose. He seemed more aroused than when I did it to him. I was recalling Serika’s technique. Seshiru then said, “Hey, ya were thinking about Serika just now, weren’t ya?” That was the first time Seshiru had surprised me. I replied, “Elgug,” nodding, which got me a “Pisses me off...” by Seshiru before he returned to my genitalia, handling it even more harshly. There was no doubt in my

mind any longer: Serika was better at it. Even so, I stood stock still next to the bed, grasping my eyeballs in each of my hands, until I eventually ejaculated.

After I returned my eyeballs to their sockets, Seshiru penetrated me from behind as was custom. That once again led me to think about Serika. Her white back. Her hips' dimples. Her round butt. Even though she would assume the same position I was in right now when I would penetrate her with a similarly-shaped limb as the one penetrating me, I doubt Serika felt the same as I was feeling then. Seshiru was rough while I was gentle. I didn't ram into Serika like how Seshiru was ramming into me. To begin with, my body was different from Serika's. I couldn't hope to understand how she felt. I wasn't Serika, thus I couldn't know.

Seshiru left the room immediately after ejaculating. I turned the room's lights on and the table lamp off.

After a bath, I picked up the book I had been reading but couldn't focus much. Images of Serika on all fours licking my genitalia while I was on my knees or of me ramming my genitalia into her kept popping up in my head. Serika was kind to me. I was kind to her too. I was also kind to Seshiru, but he wasn't to me.

I remembered that Serika wouldn't let me insert my genitalia into hers. I remembered her saying that spot wasn't meant for me. That it was reserved for the prince that would come for her.

That prince was probably Seshiru.

I bet Serika was kind to Seshiru as well, but I didn't know if he was kind to her. Even if Seshiru were to be rough with Serika, I doubt she would feel the same as me when Seshiru would ram his genitalia into her. Our bodies were constructed differently. And since they were so inherently different, there should also be a fundamental difference in how we felt. If I were to ram into her as roughly as Seshiru, or if Seshiru were to ram into her as gently as me, Serika might experience the same feeling in both cases—whether it be Seshiru or me—but no matter what I could do, I would never be able to feel things in the same way as Serika.

After a while, Serika came down. Tsutomu left and Serika entered the room. I put on Seshiru's gym bag and started by hugging Serika. I then softly pressed my lips against her cheeks before backing my face off and slowly taking a seat on the edge of the bed in a trained and elegant manner. Serika sat next to me. She knew that Seshiru had paid me a visit earlier in the day, so we didn't lie down in bed. Under normal circumstances... Under normal circumstances, Serika and I would speak about her fantasies revolving around the Castle of Illusions for a while, and then we were done; I would finish by giving her another silent hug and pressing my lips against her cheeks once more, following which she would leave the room. Under normal circumstances, that is. However, Seshiru's unusual behavior from earlier had shaken me, so I told Serika something different than usual while she was in my embrace. "Serika-san, do you have intercourse with Seshiru-san?" Serika looked straight into my eyes through Seshiru's gym bag and answered, "...Maybe, maybe not." And so I understood. Seshiru had yet to insert his genitalia inside Serika's genitalia. "When the time comes, will you be thinking about me?" I asked. She likely would. "Probably," she answered. She should be. When Seshiru's genitalia would penetrate Serika's, her anus would be left empty.

I clearly yearned for it.

However, I would rather insert my genitalia inside hers, not inside her anus.

"But Serika-san, there is something you don't know about," I said. "What could it be?" she asked. "I predict Seshiru-san will not put it inside you." Upon hearing my words, Serika tilted her head back at a slight angle. "Why is that?" she asked. I knew. Seshiru had grown a desire to lick my genitalia. He likely wanted me to insert my genitalia inside his anus as well. But I couldn't inform Serika of that. At least, not for the time being. I would let Seshiru lick my genitalia and insert his inside my anus. All in order to eventually insert my genitalia inside Serika's genitalia instead of her anus.

Seeing me choose silence, Serika was the one to speak, "You might be right. Seshiru might not put his inside me." I looked at Serika. I

couldn't see her face at all because of the gym bag. She continued: "After all, if that ever were to happen, it would draw a clear demarcation between Seshiru and I." Their psyches would disconnect by uniting their bodies. There would be a crucial distinction between the one who penetrates and the one who gets penetrated, stagnating the construction of their Castle of Illusions. Or perhaps freezing it forever. It might even make the castle crumble to dust. Its construction had only progressed so smoothly because Seshiru and Serika were in a 'You are I and I am you' state of mind. They could only lead this fight of two against the rest of the world because they were one and the same. If they dissociated, they would no longer see another instance of themselves in each other but simply someone similar to them—thus belonging to the Other and no longer existing within them. Someone existing outside of them should belong to the exterior world which they ought to fight against, meaning that the castle they had erected together would no longer be a barrier separating or protecting them from the world but a trap from the enemy, a cage enclosing them that is merely another part of the world.

When Seshiru and Serika unite through their genitals and differentiate themselves, Serika would probably abandon the Castle of Illusions. She would take her distance from Seshiru.

Then I—Gajobun, their pet within the Castle of Illusions—would have no hopes of surviving without the existence of the castle. My role as Gajobun would vanish along with the Castle of Illusions. Which means Seshiru and Serika would stop coming down to my room. Serika would stop coming to me.

Seshiru must not insert his inside Serika. Serika's genitalia being out of Seshiru's reach because I was in the middle created the perfect balance. No, actually, me inserting my genitalia inside both Seshiru and Serika, putting them on equal fields, would stabilize their 'You are I and I am you,' 'A pair as one' relationship better than now. Doing so would create stability for my role as Gajobun as well. Right. I should start inserting it inside both Seshiru and Serika.

Serika came to me on her own.

Seshiru's violence was the problem.

I wouldn't hold forever if he kept making me remove my eyeballs every single time. Removing them was quite painful.

Seshiru and Serika stopped commuting to school as soon as they entered middle school, so we had a private tutor come over to the Katou house. That tutor, Abe Atsushi-sensei, was a rakugo storyteller who performed in the Daibakushou Clan under the name Daibakushou Happy. Abe-chan had only recently joined the Daibakushou Clan, so he only knew how to perform *The Dowry*. Being a beginner storyteller, Abe-chan was eager to have others see his art, so he would perform *The Dowry* again and again during his lessons with Seshiru and Serika. They would pretend to be listening just to slack off. But since neither Seshiru nor Serika had any interest in kamigata rakugo[1] and didn't laugh at the "She's reaaaally...short," "Ya still got more?!" or "That's the same damn thing!" it wasn't much fun for Abe-chan either. But when Tsutomu joined them, he would start cackling as soon as Daisuke the Ironmonger made his entrance with "Morning there!" So Abe-chan took a liking to it and made sure to invite Tsutomu whenever he was going to perform *The Dowry*, while Seshiru and Serika, still unmotivated to study, would also invite Tsutomu so he would beg Abe-chan to perform the play. Due to all that, Abe-chan told Tsutomu *The Dowry* hundreds, even thousands of times, and Tsutomu came to memorize the play from start to finish...not. He would always laugh at the same parts. Seshiru and Serika got sick of it first, so they would invite Tsutomu, have him beg for *The Dowry*, then, when Abe-chan started performing it, would say, "We're trying to study here,"and evict them to the next room so they could slack off alone. That went on for a while, but sloppy situations cannot last forever. The siblings' cover up was in vain, and so, Junko found out that Abe-chan had been entertaining Tsutomu instead of teaching Seshiru and Serika about current, voltage, or how electromagnets work, and immediately fired him. However, Abe-chan also lived in the Hiimagotani settlement, so Tsutomu didn't mind what had happened to Abe-chan. Enthralled by kamigata rakugo, Tsutomu would

commute to Abe-chan's house like a madman, borrow rakugo audio tapes from him, and listen to them fervently.

Around when Tsutomu finally started to understand *The Dowry*'s story after two years of listening to it, Katou-kun—who was now working in a paper factory in Takefu City—went to Kyoto alone to visit Suzuki-kun for the first time since she got incarcerated. Suzuki-kun had attempted to escape from jail many times over, injured multiple prison guards during the process, and even mixed laxatives in other convicts' meals to poison them, all of which extended her prison term. Katou-kun had assumed the role of guardian for both Tsutomu and I right after that case of abuse and hadn't contacted Suzuki-kun in any way since, but Suzuki-kun's father paid Katou-kun a visit and begged him to let her see us even once, to which Katou-kun agreed, under the condition that he would only take Tsutomu with him. And so he went to check on Suzuki-kun alone before taking Tsutomu to Kyoto. But the woman he met in the visiting room no longer resembled the one he'd known 12 years ago.

"Tsukumo, open your ears wide," Katou-kun spoke to me that night. "Dad went to Kyoto today and met with mom there." The scene of Suzuki-kun gouging my eyeballs out while in tears resurfaced in my mind. Tsutomu was sleeping upstairs with his grandfather—Heisuke-san. "Looks like mom is acting up yet again. ...She built her body and looks like a beast now. Like a panther or a lion, ya get the picture... It's to the point I can imagine her muscles audibly creaking whenever she moves an arm or her neck..." "Did she seem healthy?" "Yeah. Though that probably doesn't have much to do with health. Her body seemed robust, but I wouldn't necessarily call the rest healthy." "Will dad marry mom?" "That won't happen. I have no intentions of starting over with mom. But she keeps asking to see ya two, so I went to take a look." "Oh, I see." "...Do ya want to see mom?" "No, I'm good. Seeing me would probably fluster her again." "...Yeah, probably. ...But ya see, mom says she wants to see ya." "She can't. It would break her again." "You're probably right. So I'm thinking of having Tsutomu see her at least." "That's no good either," I hurried to say. If she saw Tsutomu

visiting her instead of me, mom would undoubtedly be disappointed. I couldn't let Tsutomu see that expression of her. "Dad, stay away from mom. You shouldn't even have gone there today to begin with. You must completely separate Tsutomu and I from mom. You need to put us in a different world from her, somewhere she couldn't fathom the location of. You and mom meeting gives her hope that she could see me and Tsutomu next. So dad, don't go to Kyoto anymore. Don't write her or her father letters. We need to have her forget about us." That's the only way to kill off diabolical love. "I see," Katou-kun said. But despite what I'd told him, I wanted to see Suzuki-kun too. She was still dear to me. But that's precisely why I had to avoid meeting her. I asked Katou-kun, "Was mom pretty?" Katou-kun giggled and shrugged his shoulders, still lying on the bed. "She was scary," he said. "Hmm. I can't picture it. Mom used to be so pretty." To my words, Katou-kun asked, "What, ya remember that?" in surprise. I remembered everything. I was special. "You can't go see mom, okay?" I told him. "Yeah, I know. I'll give them a call tomorrow and turn her down," Katou-kun said.

The next morning, Katou-kun called Suzuki-kun's father and told him that he wouldn't bring us with him and that he himself wouldn't visit Miwako anymore; Suzuki-kun killed two guards and escaped before noon.

As Suzuki-kun's father was informing us about that, Junko-san was found dead.

A bit into the mountain spreading behind the Katou house, there was a lumbering workshed. It was used to store lumber as well as plenty of tools to cut it—power saws, chainsaws, hatchets, sickles, etc. Junko-san's corpse was discovered there, naked. Tsutomu found her first after getting hungry around noon and going to look for her in the workshed so she could prepare him something.

When he found her, Junko-san's stomach was all swollen up like a white, round mountain, and traversed by a suture extending from her

neck to her crotch. Junko-san had been cut open and stuffed. However, the area around her vagina hadn't been sewn, leaving a loose opening to peer into the contents of her stomach. The stuffing wasn't organs. Her organs had been piled up next to her corpse. The thing that had replaced her organs and was filling her stomach to the brim was a polyethylene bag containing play money. The bag was half-transparent so he could see the orange, green, blue, and gray bills through her vagina beyond the bloodied plastic.

3

The money came from the board game *Monopoly*. Pinpointing the *Monopoly*'s origin would prove useful in identifying the culprit. However, the principal question ultimately wasn't *who* inserted the *Monopoly* bills inside Junko-san—it was *why* they had done so. But that could wait until after the culprit's arrest. I doubt the police had been musing much about the meaning behind choosing *Monopoly*. And our problem wasn't that Junko-san had been killed, but that we had just been informed of Suzuki-kun escaping from her prison in Kyoto—we got a call roughly at the same time as when the police officers arrived. It had been at least three hours since her jailbreak.

Suzuki-kun was coming from the southwest. Everything would come to an end. Both this pretend-family and the papier-mâché Castle of Illusions.

I hadn't taken a single step out of the basement even after being informed of Junko-san's murder, but since Suzuki-san was also headed our way I couldn't sit still forever. Seshiru and Serika were crying, sobbing, screaming, and lamenting on the first and second floors in a half-crazed state. I had Tsutomu lock the door atop the stairs connecting the basement to the first floor. Seshiru had kicked on the door for a while, but he'd since given up and gone to take out his frustration somewhere else. First we had to pack our baggage. We had contacted the paper factory, so Katou-kun shouldn't have been taking long to come home. Tsutomu and I started packing bags with things we and Katou-kun needed. We were better off leaving Seshiru and Serika alone for the time being. At least until they tired themselves

out. Tsutomu was crying in fear and had trouble moving, so I had him hold onto the portable CD player and played rakugo through the headphones. Cutting him off from the world helped calm him down somewhat. We kept nimbly stuffing suitcases, sports bags, and daypacks with our underwear, pants, shirts, and hats. Tsutomu first put in clothes then tried to fit his rakugo CDs but couldn't fit them in and started panicking, so I removed some superfluous clothes for him. We wouldn't need our coats for a good while. Tsutomu looked grim when the CDs fit but not the cassette tapes, but I told him to give up. Tsutomu didn't have a portable cassette tape player anyway. We had a mini stereo here but couldn't possibly take it with us.

The phone next to the bed rang. It had indoor wiring. I answered it. "Yes, what is it?" "Oh, Tsukumo?" It was Takashi-san. "What are ya doing down there?" "We're sorting our baggage." "What's that? Really, what are ya doing?" "Preparations to leave the house." "Huh? What are ya saying, boy?" "We received a call earlier informing us that mom was headed our way, so we started preparing to evacuate." "Mom...? Oh, your mom. Still, that ain't what ya should do in this situation. The police are here so come up here for a bit." "We will head there as soon as we're done." "Leave that for later and come up right now." "Then I shall send Tsutomu alone. He was the first to discover the body, the police should want to talk with him first." "Go with him too, okay?" "I will join you later." "Later, eh. I said *now*." "I was down here the whole time and haven't seen anything, I do not know anything. Please relay that to the officers." Takashi-san seemed to want to keep arguing but I hung up without listening. Tsutomu was looking at me, the headphones still on his ears. All of his stuff was already packed. He had continued and finished packing during the call with Takashi-san. "Tsutomu," I said, to which he took his headphones off. "Go upstairs and fill the police in on the situation." "What about you?" "I still have a tad more packing to do, mostly dad's stuff." "Got it." "Now go. Also, you may leave the door up the stairs open." "Are you sure?" "Well, closing it would just stress you out" "True." Tsutomu went upstairs and left me alone in the basement; *No*, I then thought. No. I was mistaken. Suzuki-kun was Tsutomu's mother and

Tsutomu was the child between Katou-kun and Suzuki-kun while I wasn't blood-related to either Suzuki-kun nor Katou-kun. I called them mom and dad, but they weren't my biological father and mother.

If it weren't for me, Suzuki-kun, Katou-kun, and Tsutomu might have managed to get along.

Suzuki-kun was coming to kidnap me. But if she didn't find me with Katou-kun and had no idea of where I ventured to, she wouldn't know what to do anymore. Right, I had known from the onset. Being too beautiful, I couldn't belong to a family to begin with. Even my parents had nearly killed me because of my beauty. There was no hope. Someone beautiful enough to make others faint does not belong with anyone.

Tsutomu, I thought.

The only person who didn't faint upon seeing me.

My adorable little brother who had never left me since his birth and had always looked at me.

But I couldn't stay here anymore. Suzuki-kun was coming. I must not take Tsutomu with me. Tsutomu was Suzuki-kun's child, and they formed a family along with Katou-kun—adding me to it would break it. I lifted the sports bag containing my stuff. I should leave by myself. I had ten thousand yen in the bag for emergencies. I hadn't touched that bill I'd received seven years prior. It should be enough to keep me going for some time. And if it wasn't, I would simply die.

I left my bedroom. The stairs came into sight. I had only ever climbed stairs once. Just once in my entire life. I remembered pretty well what was up there. The Katou house's hallway, tatami room, and toilets. I put a foot on the first step. Stairs are sliced-up paths re-arranged vertically. One walks straight on them. But they end up at a different altitude and ahead of where they were. But their previous location becomes a bit lower, and their new location becomes a bit higher. I was slightly tense for my first ever stair climbing. My legs were wobbly. The kanji for up, 上, was based on a circle drawn above a horizontal line, while the one for down, 下, is the opposite. I was the circle crossing the line. The stairs creaked. I had never heard this sound coming from under me. I looked at my feet.

My white, bare feet. Parts of them were pink due to my blood showing through my skin. Right, I was 'barefoot.' I wasn't wearing 'shoes.' Usually one would need 'shoes' to go 'outside.'

I decided I would borrow Seshiru's old shoes. I reached the top of the stairs. The door was open, I was now one step away from the Katou household's 'hallway connected to the entrance.' I took a step forth. The hallway's floor had been polished to be smooth by the defunct Junko-san. The house felt even more spacious due to Junko-san no longer being here. Naturally, since I was looking at the first floor for basically the first time, it was merely my imagination playing tricks on me. I had already entered a world unknown to me. I looked at the 'entrance.' There were 'shoes' aligned on the 'hard-packed dirt' portion. I started walking down the hallway towards the entrance. I couldn't hear Seshiru nor Serika. There was another set of stairs connecting to the second floor on the side, but I didn't see anyone when I looked up at it.

I thought about Seshiru and Serika. I knew what would happen if I left them alone here. Intercourse. The dissolution of the 'pair as one.' The collapse of the Castle of Illusions. The start of two wars of one vs the world. Seshiru and Serika would come off to each other as enemies siding with the world, and quarrel in some ways. And their quarrel wouldn't result in anything good, neither for the Katou family nor for the world. Seshiru understood that, that's why he tried to have me insert my genitalia inside him. He wanted to invert our positions to make sure he wouldn't insert it inside Serika. He tried to stand next to Serika, not across her. I wouldn't have been needed to begin with if Serika had a male apparatus; she could have Seshiru lick hers and insert hers inside him while licking Seshiru's herself and having him insert his inside her—that would have perfectly preserved the order in their world. But since boys and girls are asymmetrical, my presence was required between them. Me leaving now would result in a semi-automatic dismantling of everything they had built up. The loss of their mother would further reduce the distance between them and accelerate their self-destruction.

Serika, I thought to myself.

Serika's face surfaced in my head. Her thin hips. Her round butt. When Serika had me insert my genitalia inside her anus she would call my name—not Seshiru's name nor that of some unknown prince. Not 'Gajobun.' She would say 'Tsukumo.'

"Ah, haah! Aahh, Tsukumo!" "Tsukumo, mm, oh, aaah, gh, mmhm." "Hoooh, mm, phew. Say, Tsukumo—ah!"

I put a foot on the stairs to the second floor. It made a creaking sound. I readjusted the bag hanging diagonally from my shoulders. I then resumed my way up. I didn't waver anymore. I would at the very least take Serika out of here. I was climbing the stairs with my bare feet. Once done, I was met with a hallway parting in two directions. I naturally didn't know where Seshiru and Serika's bedrooms were. I took a step forward, set on opening every single door until I found hers. I heard Serika's voice. Sobbing. The third room from the stairs. Before progressing down the hallway, I pressed the switch I'd found up the stairs to turn the hallway lights off. That's what Seshiru and Serika always did when coming to see me. So after doing the same, I walked up to the room from which I'd heard Serika's voice and opened the door to it. Upon seeing what was inside, I realized.

It was apparently Seshiru's bedroom and had a bunch of Seshiru's clothes scattered on the floor. It also had some of Serika's clothes. A freshly-undressed sweater and skirt from her. Serika was naked, mating with a naked Seshiru. I confirmed that Seshiru's genitalia was inside Serika's genitalia.

And thus, I understood everything.

4

I closed the door to the room Seshiru and Serika were in, backtracked my path through the hallway, went down the stairs, and headed not for the entrance but for the stairs to the basement. I, however, didn't go down it. I grabbed the bag on my shoulders and threw it down the stairs. The sports bag containing all my belongings

fell to the bottom, making a *spoof* sound. I then faced the entrance ahead and ran for it.

To the outside.

To the outside.

To the outside.

I reached the entrance's hard-packed dirt portion. There were many shoes there. I didn't know which were whose. I slipped on a pair of 'sandals' because they seemed easy to put on. I then opened the sliding front door. Beyond this point was the exterior's exterior. Outside the Katou house. The sun. Trees. I could see the mountain and the sky. Neighboring houses. Fences. A pond, a garden, dirt, stones. All of those were enveloped in a giant, single air. That giant air created 'wind.' That wind caressed my face. It was cold. And it had a scent. The smell of water. That's all I could identify but it also had many other smells. There was a square, concrete slab outside the front door, then a path of 'stepping stones' extending from it. It was made to match the average stride. I stepped on concrete for the first time, then on stepping stones for the first time. After reaching the end of the stepping stone path, I passed through the 'gate.' There were three 'patrol cars' parked outside the gate and many 'police officers in uniforms.' A police officer wearing a jacket with 'Fukui Prefecture Police' written on the back was also moving around. I figured out where Junko-san's corpse was from their movement. I got away from the stepping stone path and went around the Katou house in the direction opposite to the sun. The soil was wet, probably because it had 'rained.' 'Grass' touched my sandal-clad feet, making them wet. It tickled. It felt itchy. Even so, I kept walking and broke the Katou house's corner. Seven 'automobiles' were parked disorderly in front of me. That was the entrance to the 'mountain' behind the Katou house. Several middle-aged men wearing blue overalls were busily moving around. I approached them. They all noticed me when I reached the automobiles, resulting in them fainting one after the other. *Flop, flop*, many people were collapsing in front of me without the chance to emit a single sound, but my eyes were solely focused on the wooden 'shed' surrounded by grass and 'cedar trees' beyond the entrance to

the unkept mountain path. The shed's walls and door were evidently old, but the green 'brick roof' was an exception; it seemed to have been renewed recently. The shed was surrounded by yellow tape. Many police officers tried to call out to me and collapsed onto the ground. I walked straight for the shed, reached it, and passed the tape. "Hey, what are ya doing boy? You can't be here..." *Flop, flop, flop flop flop.* They all kept fainting with an entranced expression, not far from a full-fledged smile. Half of them were working earnestly so they tried with all their might to not focus on me, but my beauty wouldn't allow their eyes to look away. Anyone with open eyes would look at me and faint with that image serving as their last waking memory. I stepped over the numerous unconscious officers and headed for the shed. Its entrance was covered by a pure-blue 'plastic sheet.' I pulled it up. "Huh, what!?" The men inside who had screamed upon seeing me also collapsed one after the other. One of them was moved to tears. But I paid no heed to that. I was looking at Junko-san's corpse that was still here. Her stomach was swollen and the slit starting at her genitalia and continuing towards her stomach formed a window to a polyethylene bag containing *Monopoly* bills. *Monopoly* bills are small. Junko-san's stomach was big. There was something other than just bills inside that bag. Something completely different, something devoid of meaning. Yes, devoid of meaning. Something that wouldn't add any unnecessary meaning. Something that wouldn't incorporate any unwanted meaning inside her stomach: organs. But Junko-san's organs were next to her corpse. Her heart, her liver, and all of her bowels. Everything was there. Even the uterus had been removed. Well, that was inevitable. Standing next to Junko-san's corpse, on the opposite side to her organs, I grabbed a sickle off the wall. I then used it to cut the thread sewing Junko-san's stomach vertically, breaking stitches one at a time. The sewing was of poor quality. So was my sickle handling. I ended up damaging Junko-san's flesh around her chest and stomach, but she couldn't feel pain anyway. The slit widened after the passage of the sickle because of the bag trying to burst out. I ran the sickle from the summit of her stomach until below her belly button in one go, breaking the remaining thread. Her

stomach's skin bent and split apart, revealing the polyethylene bag. The bag had been closed by rolling up its opening. I brought my face to the bloodied bag and looked at the blood-seeped *Monopoly* bills peering through the half-transparent bag and the source of that blood: someone's organs.

Right. Of course, it had to be organs.

These weren't Junko-san's organs. They belonged to another murdered woman. And they were here to guide me. The police might have been able to identify someone by examining those, but I couldn't. I didn't need to. I already knew. Two other women had been killed. Not mothers. Women who weren't mothers. Kawakami Michiyo, Kurihara Yurika, Ueda Yuuko, Ueda Naoko, Ookubo Yuki, Yamamoto Yuri, Taniguchi Ayumi, Morikawa Seiko, Hirose Akemi, Okudaira Mizuho, Yagi Rie, Kimura Rie, Kimura Aoi, Kimura Izumi. These were all the adult, unmarried women in Hiimagotani. In addition, the only other places in Hiimagotani where one could work leisurely in similar conditions to this workshed were the Higuchis' vacant house and the Takahashis' garage. The Higuchis were closer to me. I left the workshed. Most of the people outside were still unconscious, but since I came out right when other police officers who'd come to check on the commotion were confused about the mass faintings, I once again made many people collapse onto the ground. I moved my legs at a hurried pace. *Oohh, so this is 'running,'* I thought. But I couldn't 'run' well. I couldn't grasp the timing at which to kick my legs off of the ground or return them to it. My legs were taking weird trajectories. I didn't want to injure myself by falling, so I reduced my pace. I walked. I could walk just fine. But I had to hurry. Suzuki-kun might already have reached Fukui.

Working my unobedient legs as fast as I could, I returned to the Katou house's gate, made all the officers and onlookers collapse at once, then proceeded along the road like a 'bowling' ball. The Higuchi house was on the left at the end of a gentle, downward slope which one can find on their left after progressing west for a bit on the road leading to the Katou house. Other police officers who had noticed the abnormal state of the people nearby the workshed and in front of the

Katou house's gate were starting to cause a commotion, but they had yet to figure out I was the cause. I pulled on the Higuchi house's front gate. It wasn't locked. I inspected my surroundings. There was a vacant warehouse next to the vacant house and a back door to access it from the house. An aluminum door. Its window's glass had been shattered.

I was at the right place.

Which cast suspicions upon Kurihara Yurika as well as the Ueda Yuuko and Ueda Naoko sisters, who live nearby. I went around to the back door and twisted its doorknob. The knob turned with a c*lack* sound which slightly opened the door along with it. I picked up the same scent of blood I'd come across earlier.

I fully opened the door and took a look at the dusty room. It was adjacent to a washroom and was furnished with a dusty wash basin and a washing machine. I took my sandals off and walked in. I progressed down the hallway while following the scent of blood, passed through a room equipped with a traditional hearth with a kitchen next to it, then entered a tatami room; there, I came upon the corpses of Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko, each lying on a futon in the middle of the neighboring, Japanese-style rooms. The sliding screens were currently left open, but there was no doubt they were usually closed when someone was working here.

Kurihara Yurika's corpse was in the room in the back. The light on the ceiling was on. But someone might have felt as though that single light bulb wasn't bright enough; Kurihara Yurika's corpse was surrounded by three desk lamps, all of them still turned on. I started scrutinizing the bodies. Kurihara Yurika's corpse was slightly older. Her pupils had completely dilated. I lifted her arm; the rigor mortis was mostly gone. I moved to the other room. This one got light from the outside corridor so the light on the ceiling was turned off and there weren't any desk lamps around her. I inspected the corpse. Ueda Naoko's cornea had started to dilate, but I could still see her iris. Also the rigor mortis was still setting in.

About a day had passed between the murders of Kurihara Yurika

and Ueda Naoko.

I opened the slits extended from their necks to their genitals. These ones hadn't been sewn, just haphazardly put together after the skin had been stretched wide. I peeled back the skin on both sides for the two corpses. As expected, most of their organs had been taken out of their stomachs and a handful of *Monopoly* bills had been deposited inside each.

I then remembered that *Monopoly* came from 'to monopolize' in English. *Of course*, I thought. The money used here couldn't have come from *The Game of Life* or *Daifugo*. It had to be from *Monopoly* and not anything else.

Children instinctively tend to want to monopolize their mothers.

Though I didn't know whether Seshiru and Serika felt that way.

I cried on the spot. Tears flowed from my eyes. They dripped from my jaw, hit the tatami, and wetted it. I couldn't bear standing any longer. I headed for the corridor on my unsteady legs and knocked down the bucket set up on the tatami next to Ueda Naoko. The water inside gushed out onto the tatami and wetted them, but I cared not for it. I opened the sliding door, came out onto the corridor, lay down onto the wooden floor, and cried. My tears would remain here and probably be archived as data for this case when the forensic police would come to collect evidence, but, even so, I cared not for it.

I had been thrown away.

Seshiru and Serika had discarded me and chosen to manage with the two of them.

They had taken actions to no longer require me between them.

I turned off the ceiling light and the desk lamps in the room where Kurihara Yurika's corpse was in and left by the back door. I had no idea how much time it would take before someone came here. But I figured there was still some time left, so Seshiru and Serika could continue losing themselves in love-making for the time being. I had shed tears for the first time in my life. It had eased the pain of having

been discarded by Seshiru and Serika a bit. I found myself in awe at the act of shedding tears. I decided I would cry whenever something bad were to happen in the future.

Still, my eyes felt a little gross so I returned to the back of the Higuchi house, took out both of my eyeballs by the wash basin, and washed them as well as my eye cavities with water. I then reinserted my eyeballs. That was refreshing. It was now time to go home. Then leave for good. My emotions had led me to waste time.

I left the Higuchi house and returned to the Katou house. There was still a huge commotion because of the faintings; police officers would call out to their colleagues, slap their cheeks, or shake their unconscious bodies. When I passed by, the people awake all collapsed to the back, the front, or the sides along with a heavy sigh.

I was the beautiful Katou Tsukumojuuku. No longer Gajobun. No, I wasn't even a Katou anymore. I was simply Tsukumojuuku. I had no surname.

I passed through the Katou house's entrance, took my sandals off, walked down the hallway, descended the stairs to the basement, picked up the sports bag I'd thrown away at the base of those stairs, then climbed back up the stairs. Coming out into the hallway, I tried to head for the entrance but got stopped by a sudden whim. I climbed the stairs to the second floor. I headed for Seshiru's bedroom. I 'knocked' on the door. "Come in," Seshiru answered.

I opened the door. Seshiru and Serika had finished mating and were now lying naked on the bed. Serika was on the side closer to me while Seshiru lay sprawled, supporting himself on his elbows. They weren't covered by a blanket so I could see their full bodies.

"The heck Gajobun, ya made it to the second floor?" Seshiru said, looking away to make sure he didn't see my face.

"Yeah," I said, "somehow."

"Hahahah, must've been quite the distance from the basement, huh?"

"Not really. It wasn't that far, at least compared to Higuchi-san's house."

A smile appeared on Seshiru's profile as he went silent. Serika,

who had been facing the ceiling with her eyes closed, turned her face to me. Our eyes met for an instant.

"Serika and Seshiru, I want to wish you two a happy birthday—well, one and two days late, though," I said.

Serika, no longer looking my way, furrowed her eyebrows.

"Huh? How do ya know that," Seshiru asked. "And ya're fuckin' late."

"It's not rocket science. I just saw you two having sex earlier. That gave it all away."

Serika said "No!" and faced away from me. Showing me her round, white butt. She put her hands around Seshiru's hips.

"And so?" Seshiru said. "Did ya tell anyone?"

I shook my head. "I didn't."

"I bet," Seshiru said. "If that had gotten out we wouldn't have been having sex so leisurely anyway." He laughed. "So what, ya didn't come back just to tattle on us, did ya?"

"Of course not."

"I hope so. We're still naked so at least wait until we're ready to leave, please."

"Mm? You are going to leave the house too?"

"Obviously, moron. As if we could spend one more night under the same roof as them."

"..."

"What's your plan now, Gajobun?"

"I'm no longer Gajobun," I said.

Seshiru was taken aback, then smiled and nodded a few times. "True, my bad. Ya ain't nobody, nor are ya anything. You're really nothing."

"Seshiru, go die, okay?"

"Huh!? Shaddup moron, don't get on your high horses. I'll kill ya."

"I'm going now. I want to know one last thing before we part."

"What?"

"What are you going to choose as your new name?"

"Mh? Shaddup. You better believe I've already decided on one."

"What is it?"

“Not tellin’ ya.”

“That’s the only thing I want to know.”

“Then it’s the only thing I won’t tell ya.”

“You really should die, Seshiru.”

“Idiot. You hollow poop. Shaddup.”

“You’re so cold despite how much you used to pamper me, Seshiru. I even let you insert yours inside me.”

Bam! A pillow got shot from the bed and hit the wall next to me.

“Shaddup! Get out of here, moron! Leave already!”

“I was looking when you buried your face into my crotch. I was looking when you were licking my penis like a girl.”

“I’ll fuckin’ kill ya for real,” Seshiru said and took out an old ‘katana’ from besides the bed. Heisuke-san had probably kept it hidden somewhere ever since the ‘war’ had ended. *Schhhwing*, he drew the katana. The rusty blade gleamed here and there due to the remains of blood mixed with the rust.

“Drop it, Seshiru.”

“Shaddup. I’ll slice your face off.”

‘What?!’ Words came from somewhere other than my brain. I was surprised at how I found myself as angry as when I had cried earlier. ‘You don’t have that right.’ The only people who may slice my face off are those poor ones imprisoned by their diabolical love for me. But neither Seshiru nor Serika loved me even a tiny bit.

Seshiru stepped off the bed, still naked, and slowly walked towards me. The katana in hand, constantly holding it above his head, ready to strike.

“Diiiie!”

Seshiru swung the katana down at me; I took a step towards him and successfully avoided it. Seshiru couldn’t directly look at me so it was relatively easy to dodge the blade. But I had noticed: Seshiru had tried to cut at me diagonally, starting at my shoulders, to split me in half. He was seriously intending on killing me. Naturally. I was a hindrance to him now. The heavy blade missed its target and pierced into the tatami mat. I rammed into Seshiru from the side. He stumbled. He took one hand off the katana. I kicked him, confirmed

he had taken his other hand off the katana too, then stole it from him. I imitated his earlier stance. An 'upper posture.' Seshiru was looking at me from below. I could tell from the sudden loss of glimmer in his eyes that my extreme beauty was making him dizzy. I had the power to cut Seshiru dead.

I looked at Serika.

She was observing what I was going to do...not—she was observing what was going to happen to Seshiru.

Serika wasn't looking at me.

Not because I was too beautiful so she looked away to protect herself from fainting.

Serika was simply not looking at me.

I asked her. "What will Seshiru's new name be?"

She answered. "...Inugami Yasha."

"And yours?"

"Kirika Mai."

"...So you didn't choose Kurihara Yasha and Ueda Mai, eh."

Well, 'Inugami' and 'Kirika' might indeed be more fitting for residents of the Castle of Illusions.

I then slowly lowered the katana, brought its tip to Seshiru's left chest—right above his heart—as he was desperately trying not to faint, and made two shallow incisions to draw an X mark.

I told him: "Remember what I'm about to say, Inugami Yasha. I will one day come to pierce this X mark on your chest. I will come to stab through your heart and put you to a final rest. Live your best life until then, Inugami Yasha. Run away from me as long and as fast as you can manage."

Seshiru's eyes were already out of focus as they looked up at me, but his shoulders jolted. It had gotten across.

Then, I walked up to the bed Serika was lying on, face-up. She stiffened her body, still looking away from me. Small shoulders. A small chest. Slender arms. A smooth stomach. I placed the tip of the blade on Serika's stomach. I made a shallow, straight incision—so shallow she barely shed any blood—starting above her belly button, then descending to her belly button, her abdomen, and finally her

pubic hair. Serika closed her eyes, gritted her teeth, and made sure not to look at me.

I told her: “Kirika Mai, remember this too. I will assuredly come to you one day, when you will form a child inside this very belly. When that happens, I will cut this stomach open, take the child out, and rob it from you. I will then devour your child somewhere outside of your reach.”

Serika’s teeth were chattering loudly. I took the sword away from her stomach, picked up the scabbard on the floor next to the bed, and sheathed the katana along with a *gsshhhhhaah* sound.

I shall hold onto this katana.

I got away from the bed and opened Seshiru’s closet. It contained his toys. Amongst which was a *Monopoly* set. I opened it; there were no bills left inside. They must have used them all for Kurihara Yurika, Ueda Naoko, and Junko-san. But there were sets of *The Game of Life* and *Daifugo* next to the *Monopoly* set, which both contained fake bills, so I made due with them. I opened the boxes of the two games, took the bills out, stood up, glanced one last time at the lethargic Seshiru and Serika, and left the bedroom.

I entered the neighboring room. As I’d thought, it was Serika’s bedroom. I walked up to the desk next to the window and opened its drawers. I found what I’d been looking for inside the third one. The thread and needle used to sew Junko-san’s stomach. Both of them were stained with blood. Perfect.

I then inspected the room and discovered the file they had been using to document the construction of the Castle of Illusions, which Serika used to bring every now and then.

I shall hold onto this.

I left Serika’s bedroom.

I inserted the katana and the Castle of Illusions file inside the sports bag while descending the stairs from the second to the first floor. The file fit in, but the katana was too big so the tip of the scabbard stuck out. Still, nobody would think it was a real katana, surely.

Now, I had to hurry.

Suzuki-kun was undoubtedly headed my way at this very moment.

5

My overbearing beauty only needed a single pair of sunglasses. Everyone stopped fainting when I wore them. Eyes are the feature most efficient at conveying people's beauty. I borrowed Takashi-san's Ray-Bans and came out in front of everyone.

"Oh, you there, are ya the Katous' other kid?" a police officer wearing a uniform walked up to me and asked. "Yes," I answered. So he said, "We're hearing from everyone in your family one at a time, so please sit still in the house and don't come out yet," so I told him, "I will resolve the case right now." The officer took a puzzled expression. "I'm not sure what ya're on about but just go back inside." "Leaving it to you would take too much time. I'm in a bit of a hurry. I will put a term to this case right away, so please tell everyone to listen to me." "...Ya know, the people here aren't playing around, okay?" "I will now reveal the culprit." "Hey...saying dumb stuff will just—" "The polyethylene bag inside Junko-san's stomach contains human organs which don't belong to her, but to Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san." "Huhhh?" "They are both missing, aren't they?" "Huh? ...I mean, they are." "It's quite easy to find their corpses." "...Ah, so it was ya! Ya're the one who entered the shed and touched the corpse! What are ya thinking?! You obviously shouldn't do that! What's going through your head, geez!" "I was fulfilling the necessary conditions so I could think rationally." "Wha—" "There are no mysteries before me —only answers."

Sugano Takuya, a business suit-wearing police officer from the Fukui Police Department's First Criminal Investigation Team, tagged along with me. Sugano-san looked a lot like the author Yoshida Shuuichi. He was wearing glasses too. His arms crossed, he was calmly overseeing me taking pictures of the workshed with the polaroid camera I had borrowed from the forensics. Junko-san's corpse was still

there, but the polyethylene bag from her stomach had been taken away.

I handed Sugano-san the pictures I had taken. He said, “What’s that? The heck were ya takin’ pics of? I thought ya would focus on the corpse. But kid, this is just soil.” I told him, “It’s not merely soil. The culprit brought that in.” “What!?” he said and looked in the direction I had been directing the camera towards. There was a pile of soil on Junko-san’s left side. I walked up to that pile and destroyed it with my hands while saying, “Look inside this, there are seeds.” Sunflower seeds poured out of it. “H-h-hey, wait, don’t touch it so recklessly,” Sugano-san panicked but I ignored him and took a picture of the seeds. I handed the polaroid to Sugano-san after it slid out of the camera, then lifted up the back of Junko-san’s corpse. “A-ah, stop that, I keep tellin’ ya not to touch it.” I took out a book from below her back and showed it to Sugano-san. It was Higuchi Ichiyou’s *Separate Ways* in pocket format. “What the…” Sugano-san muttered. I passed by him and left the shed. There were many police officers and onlookers waiting outside—waiting for my words. I hung the camera around my neck and let go of it. “Are the families of Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san present here?” Two old couples got startled before raising their hands. Of course they would be. They lived in the neighborhood. I asked them, “Are you Kurihara-san and Ueda-san’s parents?” They both nodded. I told them, “The police seem to have some inquiries for you,” to which the four of them each asked “What can it be?” or “Mm? Have at it,” however, I didn’t answer them and instead faced the officers and told them, “Here are the Kuriharas and the Uedas. They seem to have things to tell you about. Please take them somewhere comfortable. Ah, the police car parked over there looks perfect. We should be able to contact you easily there.” The Kuriharas then objected “What, we don’t have anything to say, ya know? Ain’t ya the one with questions?” so I replied, “No, well, the officers wouldn’t be able to relax here either, so please enter the car over there and have a nice talk with them,” which caused the four of them to look at each other then go silent. They decided to go along with it despite their confusion. After seeing off six police officers, the

Kuriharas, and the Uedas, I told Sugano-san, “Tell them to keep them in there for about an hour. Also, do not let them return to their domiciles no matter what.” Sugano-san furrowed his eyebrows and asked “Why?” “We will soon discover their daughters’ corpses.” “Where?” “I’m already done guiding you there.” “What do ya mean, guiding? Ya know where they are?” “Our guide is this book.” “Huh?” Sugano-san looked at the book *Separate Ways* he was holding in his hand. “By the way, is it fine for you to bring this outside?” “Oh, shoot. Stay where you are,” he said and hurried back inside the workshed where he put down the pocket book next to Junko-san before coming back. I asked him, “Do you have a cellphone on you?” “Eh? What? A phone? Yeah, what about it?” The two couples were walking on the path beside the workshed in the direction to leave the mountain. “Then could you use it to call one of these officers after these four are done entering that car?” “Yeah, I’m completely lost, but calling them? I sure can. The guy over there is basically my grandson.” “That’s perfect,” I said as the couples entered the police vehicles I had designated earlier. Alright. They were following my directions obediently. “The contents of the polyethylene bags have been sent over for tests, right? Have they received them already?” “I’d be surprised if they haven’t.” “Then please use your phone right now and confirm that the contents of both stomachs from that bag match with Kurihara-san’s dinner from two days ago and Ueda-san’s dinner from yesterday.” Sugano-san was speechless. I started walking anyway. “Come on, please do it as we walk. We will go find Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san right now.” “Ah, eh, wait…”

I didn’t wait.

After descending the mountain and leaving the woods, Sugano-san asked, “Where are ya goin’?” so I stopped in my tracks. “Over there. Look.” “What? Where?” “That house.” “Huh? What house? Where?” “The house with a big warehouse. The owners are called Higuchi.” “Hoh?” “The house is vacant, but there is a back door on the left, can’t you see it? Its window is broken.” “Oh there. You’re right, it’s broken. What next?” “I think Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san’s corpses are inside.” “What are you saying? …So that’s what the book

from earlier meant?" "Exactly. The organs stuffed inside Junko-san's corpse informed us of the other victims' identities while the Higuchi Ichiyou book informed us of their location."

Sugano-san and a dozen officers were standing inside the tatami room on the first floor of the Higuchi house. We could hear the onlookers making a ruckus outside to let them come in, but the air inside the room was dead silent.

The two corpses on the two futons in the two rooms were lying face-up with their swollen, round stomachs. Their bellies were sliced with a straight, vertical cut which had been sloppily sewn back. There was a gap at their crotches providing a view over the blood, the polyethylene bags, and the organs and toy bills inside them. I started by taking pictures of the three lit desk lamps situated near Kurihara Yurika-san's pillow, of the knocked-over bucket next to Ueda Naoko-san's futon, and of the water it had spilled, then headed over to the Higuchis' kitchen. I opened a drawer under the sink; one knife remained inside. Good enough. I brought the knife to the space where the corpses were, approached Kurihara Yurika-san while the officers were dumbfounded, and severed the thread sewing the skin on Kurihara Yurika-san's stomach together before anyone could stop me. Her stomach then burst open and exposed the sealed polyethylene bag. Sugano-san and the others raised muted screams and each took a step back. I used that opportunity to open Ueda Naoko-san's stomach too. Her stomach burst open similarly and revealed another sealed polyethylene bag. I put the knife down. "It seems they each have two people's organs stuffed inside them once again."

Sugano-san could barely breathe but still managed to say this: "Which means...what, even more people have been killed...?"

I nodded. "Probably four more. At the very least."

"...Who..."

"The answer..." I said as I lifted Ueda Naoko-san's back and took out the pocket book from beneath her—Kobayashi Hideo's *The Author's Identity*—"...can only be found by following the guidance of this book."

"..."

I returned to the neighboring room, lifted up Kurihara Yurika-san's corpse, and took out the pocket book version of Kobayashi Nobuhiko's *The Columns Dance* from beneath her.

"Oh, another 'Kobayashi,'" I said. "There is but one residence under the name Kobayashi in Hiimagotani."

"...Where?" Sugano-san swallowed his breath before asking so with much grief.

The Kobayashi house had a detached building used as a workshed to prepare dried persimmons during the winter. There was a big basket full of fresh persimmons next to the lifeless hearth. We found the entire Kobayashi family on the second floor of that workshed. The father, Isamu-san, the mother, Kazuko-san, the eldest son, Sousuke-kun, and the eldest daughter, Sachi-san, were all piled up, naked, inside the industrial fridge.

However, despite the number of corpses amounting to four, the lack of stuffing inside their split-open stomachs, the skillful suture, and the embalm applied to their faces made for a relatively tame impression.

"What in God's name..." Sugano-san crouched down on his knees.

I told him, "It's still too early to give in."

Sun, Moon, and star marks had been drawn on the shoulders and back of the topmost corpse, Sousuke-san's; below him, Sachi-san's mouth was stuffed with a frozen mackerel and chicken wing; one more layer below, wooden votive tablets of sheep, horses, and bovines had been forcefully crammed into Isamu-san's mouth. Kazuko-san, at the bottom, didn't have anything. I had the officers move the corpses one by one so I could take pictures of them in order.

"The heck... Hey, boy, explain. What in the world is happening?" Sugano-san asked me. "Will it keep going on? Tell me, were even more people killed?"

I put the camera down and replied, "This is probably the end. For

the murders, at least."

"Good..." Sugano-san said, apparently relieved.

I looked at the four of the Kobayashis' corpses. "...Look at this," I said, making Sugano-san face me despite looking like he had had enough. I pointed at the area beneath the ears of Kazuko-san's frozen corpse. There was a slit stretching from under her ears to below her jaw. It had been sewn back with a fine thread. "Neither Junko-san, Kurihara-san, nor Ueda-san had this kind of cut, had they?" "No," Sugano-san confirmed with much lethargy. "What could this be?" "Beats me." I knew the answer. "It's the scar from a fat-removal procedure. Someone removed the fat from under her skin, cut off the surplus skin so it wouldn't stay flabby, held it together with pins, and sewed it back all the way under her jaw." It seemed Sugano-san still had the capacity to be surprised—he opened his eyes wide and crouched next to me. "Look," I said. "Kazuko-san's cheeks are hollow, but take a closer look at her nose, her forehead, and her neck. They have a fair amount of fat. Look at her arms and legs too. They don't match well with her torso. Her torso and face are slender while the rest is pretty flabby. Isamu-san, Sousuke-kun, and Sachi-san don't have any such cuts on their jaws, and their faces have all the fat that should belong there. The culprit must have either been too tired to operate on the others after being done with Kazuko-san, or couldn't continue for some other reason."

"Ah... Err, wait, what operation?" Sugano-san asked.

"The liposuction. Not a legitimate one, obviously, it is quite rough around the edges," I said and left the room.

"Hey, what, where are ya going now?"

"I want to investigate something in the main house. Please wait here for a moment."

I pushed the officers aside, descended the shed's stairs, and left it. There was a big crowd of onlookers. It seemed to account for most of Hiimagotani's inhabitants. Though, needless to say, Seshiru and Serika weren't amongst them. I ignored their questions and headed for the Kobayashi house's front door. I put a hand on the handle. It wasn't locked. I opened the door and stepped inside. I proceeded further after

removing my sandals. I took the stairs to the second floor, entered Isamu-san and Kazuko-san's bedroom, grabbed an envelope from the topmost drawer, left the bedroom, went downstairs, put my sandals back on, left the house, entered the shed, climbed the stairs, and returned to Sugano-san's side on the second floor. "Here is what I've found," I said and handed him the envelope. "What's that?" he asked as he opened it and looked at its contents. Inside were 150,000 yen in cash and a letter—here is what the letter said:

'To Yuuko-chan, thank you for the slimming surgery. — Kobayashi.'

"Huh? Who's this Yuuko-chan now?" Sugano-san asked.

"The culprit of this case," I said. "There is but one 'Yuuko' in Hiimagotani."

"Who?"

"Do you remember Ueda Naoko, one of the victims found in the Higuchis' house? It's her big sister, Ueda Yuuko."

When Sugano-san, the officers, the onlookers, and I arrived at the Uedas' house, Yuuko was already gone. Most of her belongings remained in her bedroom, so she appeared to have escaped in urgency with only the bare minimum. Sugano-san gave orders to the confused officers who then scattered outside. Looking at Ueda Yuuko in the photo frame placed on the table, I told Sugano-san:

"I will explain it all now."

Ueda Yuuko weighed nearly 100 kg despite being barely 150 cm tall. She didn't just look heavy; she was.

6

I showed them a certain magazine. It was a magazine aimed at young girls, but had an article on liposuctions. A big circle had been drawn around it with a glowing pen. "Ueda Yuuko-san wanted to

receive a liposuction," I said. "But she didn't have the money and was scared of being operated on. That was the source of her dilemma. You see, Ueda Yuuko-san is a nurse at the Nishimura General Hospital in Takefu..." I said, opening Ueda Yuuko's closet, taking a nurse uniform out of it, and showing it to everyone. "She had some knowledge about the procedure. She also had access to the tools. In the best case scenario, she would have operated on herself. However..." I grabbed one of the medical manuals from Ueda Yuuko's bedroom, opened it to the page explaining the techniques used in liposuctions in the plastic surgery section, and showed it to everyone. This explanation too was underlined in parts with a glowing pen. "She was scared of doing that as well. And so, she came up with a brilliant plan to kill two birds with one stone: try the liposuction on someone from the closeby Kobayashi household—probably Kazuko-san—who also suffered from obesity. If that went well, she could then do the same on herself, or even use the surgery fee she would receive from it to pay a legitimate doctor to do it. Having lost the ability to make rational decisions after worrying for so long over something so trivial, Ueda Yuuko-san hastily brought the offer to the Kobayashis, got their consent, and started operating on Kazuko-san's cheeks first. But, of course, being a complete amateur with no experiences in liposuctions, the surgery predictably failed. Furthermore, that failure even led to Kazuko-san's death. There can be many causes for her death. Administering the wrong dosage of anesthesia, the wrong dosage of other drugs, the wrong kind of drugs, administering them at the wrong time, clumsiness during the procedure, or a mix of those. Well, these kinds of incidents are bound to happen when someone with no medical license tries to wield a scalpel over someone else's body. And so, faced with such an incident, Ueda-san, who seemed to be of a rather obsessive nature, made the worst possible decision under the apotheosis of stress: to murder the whole Kobayashi family. She killed all four of them in one way or another. She then, still perturbed, brooded over how to dissimulate her crime, and ended up worsening the situation. She chose to reap the life of three more people. The chosen three were Kurihara Yurika-san, Yuuko-san's big sister Ueda

Naoko-san, and Katou Junko-san. As for the motive that pushed her to choose Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san, perhaps this…" I said, opening a notebook, "…diary could help us reach a conjecture. This seems to contain multiple sections cursing her sister, whom would belittle and insult her whenever they met, and Kurihara Yurika-san, whom—according to Yuuko-san—'thinks of herself as important because she's slim and pretty' and 'internally looks down on' Yuuko-san.

"As for Katou Junko-san's murder, her perfectly fulfilling all the requirements for the camouflage operation is regrettably the only reason I can think of…"

I tried to recall Junko-san's face from when she was still alive, but since I had only caught occasional glimpses of it when she would bring my meals down to the basement, I couldn't remember it in great detail. I could, however, visualize her dead, pale face lying in the workshed very vividly.

"…Now, Ueda Yuuko-san went through quite a complex process.

"Her first task regarded the murders of Kurihara Yurika-san, Ueda Naoko-san, and Katou Junko-san—in short, the extra murders. She needed to make them look like they were her main objective, with the four Kobayashi murders—her actual objective—looking like whimsical, excess murders.

"The order is complicated.

"She slit open the stomachs of the Kobayashi family members and emptied their organs into four separate polyethylene bags. She then sewed the corpses shut, cleaned them, applied the embalming, and put them in the large industrial refrigerator on the second floor of the detached building next to the Kobayashis' house along with the organs.

"She then murdered Kurihara Yurika-san. She slit her stomach open, took out her organs, and put them inside another bag.

"Next came Ueda Naoko-san's murder. Likewise, she slit her stomach open and emptied it of her organs which she placed inside another bag.

“She then inserted two polyethylene bags full of the Kobayashis’ organs inside each of Kurihara-san and Ueda Naoko-san’s empty stomachs before sewing them shut.

“That’s when she placed the Kobayashi Hideo and Kobayashi Nobuhiko pocket books under their corpses.

“She then brought Kurihara-san and Ueda Naoko-san’s organs to Katou Junko-san, whom she killed and emptied her stomach of its organs before replacing them with the polyethylene bags containing Kurihara-san and Ueda-san’s organs and sewing the slit shut.

“And she placed the Higuchi Ichiyou pocket book under Junko-san’s corpse.

“Now, between the four corpses of the eradicated Kobayashi household, Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san’s two corpses resting in the vacant Higuchi house, and Katou Junko-san’s corpse situated inside the workshed right next to her domicile, it is no wonder that Junko-san would be discovered first. Junko-san had a family and was a housewife. As such, her whereabouts would be checked three times a day by her family to eat. And indeed, she was found rather quickly by a kid in search of someone to prepare food for him.

“Here is the original scenario Ueda Yuuko-san had planned for: First, someone would find Katou Junko’s corpse. They would find someone else’s organs inside Junko-san’s stomach and think that more people had been killed. They would use the Higuchi Ichiyou pocket book to find Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san’s corpses inside the empty house, as well as the four people’s worth of organs inside them. And finally they would use the Kobayashi Hideo and Kobayashi Nobuhiko pocket books under these two corpses to find the Kobayashi family’s corpses.

“However, as is, anyone would amply be able to imagine that the Kobayashis were first killed, that their organs were emptied and then placed inside Kurihara-san and Ueda-san’s corpses, and that these two’s organs were ultimately placed inside Katou Junko-san’s corpse—which is the reality of what happened.

“That’s why Yuuko-san placed the Kobayashis inside the

refrigerator.

"When the police reach the Kobayashis' four corpses, they would surely wonder, 'Why were only these four put inside a refrigerator?' which would in turn invite the assumption that 'They were placed there to move the estimated time of murder forward by preserving them at a fresher state than the others. Which means that these four had been killed at an earlier stage.'"

I could feel everyone's confusion.

I added,

"Naturally, that assumption would have surfaced even without this refrigerator trick. Even if she hadn't done anything, anyone would think that the Kobayashi family had been killed first. However, the assumption that 'The Kobayashi family was killed first' offers a second reading of the trick: 'Wouldn't it have worked even without the refrigerator?' But it doesn't stop there: 'Then why in the world was the refrigerator used?' 'Couldn't it actually be a lousy bluff?' 'In other words, the refrigerator was used to hide the fact that something didn't happen, that the four corpses hadn't been in there for such a long period.' 'Maybe the sequence of murders was actually falsified and the Kobayashis were killed second, or even last.' 'Which would mean that the Kobayashi murders were merely a ploy to disrupt the police's investigation.' 'The culprit might have used the expectation that nobody would massacre a whole family *just* to interfere with an investigation, this might secretly be a clever cover up.' 'In short, the tragic Kobayashis might have been killed solely to mess with the police, they might have been superfluous casualties.' etc."

Everyone went silent. They were still confused. Most people couldn't imagine that someone would think that far.

I walked up to Ueda Yuuko's bookshelf. I read out random titles from there in whichever order my eyes followed. "*Nenuwenrah's Locked Serdab*, *Jesus Christ's Locked Room*, *The Butterflies Labyrinth*, *The Tokyo Zodiac Murders*, *Murder in the Crooked House*, *Water for the Dead*,

A Knight in Strange Lands, *From Abashiri to Far Away, Mitarai Kiyoshi's Dance*, *Vertigo*, *Six Slices of Tonkatsu, The Four Hour and Thirty Minute Barrier in the Nagano-Jouetsu Bullet Train*, *Apocryphon of Ouroboros*, *Foundation of Ouroboros*, *String Puppets Laugh Five Times*, *Inverted Skulls Sing Three Times*, *The Magician from Hell*, *The Saint Ursula Convent Tragedy*, *Dismemberment Analysis*, *A Perfect Detective*, *The Man Who Died Seven Times*, *The Night Bloodthirsts Convene...*"

It was mostly just mystery novels.

"People who read these kinds of books all day can think that way."

Everyone took a short breath. The room was filled with a silent sound of recognition.

I then continued.

"But the scenario concocted by Ueda Yuuko-san's mystery-novel-poisoned mind doesn't stop there.

"For plot convenience sake—in other words, to have the great detective or the protagonist with the great detective role shine—mystery novels depict police officers to be somewhat less capable than in reality. Therefore, Ueda Yuuko-san, being only familiar with those types of portrayals, was irremediably worried about whether the police officers would be able to make the assumptions and connections she had planned for.

"That is why Ueda-san called for a great detective."

Sugano-san opened his mouth agape. He then said, "What are ya saying? Great detectives don't exist in reality."

I replied, "Even if they don't in reality, they do right here." I tapped on one of the rows of mystery novels filling the shelf. "And...here too," I said, tapping on the laptop sitting on Ueda Yuuko's desk.

It was already done booting up and connecting to the internet.

"The great detective Ueda Yuuko-san summoned is right here," I clicked on one of the bookmarked links. The screen switched to the selected page. Its title was 'Japan Detective Club.' Below that, a list of icons, each coming with a bizarre name. They all appeared to be

people calling themselves great detectives. I chose ‘Ajiro Souji. Funky aura, super handsome,’ and clicked on him. A young man’s picture appeared alongside an introduction.

I’m the Expert Concentration Great Detective, Ajiro Souji. Currently working as a phone detective～ (kaomoji) Feel free to contact me anytime!

Most notable case solved → The Neo Neo Honjin Murders (URL)

Clicking on ‘Expert Concentration’ opened a new window with an explanation: ‘A meta deduction that works by focusing on the key points of a case.’ It wasn’t clear what it was supposed to be explaining. Or how it was any different from someone doing their best to solve something. Well, it was probably a matter of how intense that ‘best’ was.

I clicked on ‘phone detective.’ Yet another window popped up. ‘Solving tough cases godspeed! Say goodbye to your worries for just the telephone fees! Tel me and tell me about your case! 08-47-79-52-66 (mnemonic: tipswlcom)

If your calls aren’t getting through → (email address)’ I wasn’t sure whether the ‘for just the telephone fees’ and the ‘tipswlcm’ contradicted each other. I didn’t care.

“Ueda Yuuko-san searched for a great detective on this page and invited this very Ajiro Souji to Fukui.” I changed the tab and opened the sent messages section. “Sure enough, as you can see, Ueda Yuuko-san has sent an email to Ajiro Souji-san.”

Nice to meet you. I am a nurse living in West Akatsuki, a town in Fukui Prefecture. [Introductions abridged] I am messaging you today because of the terrible murder that has occurred in this city. I suspect the same culprit from the Serial Belly Slicing Case that happened three years ago in Fukui to be behind this. They might have returned to

Fukui to cause another tragedy! This might have already evolved into a serial murder case! Please help me, Ajiro-san! [Rest abridged]

Peeping at the screen and reading the email, Sugano-san said, “The heck? What’s that serial belly thing from three years ago...” tilting his head, so I filled him in, “Sugano-san, don’t you remember? Three years ago, there was a case where 14 people had been sliced open and sewn back without them noticing anything. You know, 13 of them had banknote rolls stuffed inside their bellies. It amounted to three or four million yen I think.” Sugano-san then went, “Oh, yeahhhh, ohhh right, that. I remember. Thinking about it, that one has yet to be solved, huh,” and followed with, “But this time it’s completely different, ain’t it? All the victims were still alive there, here they’re all dead,” so I told him, “There are similarities.” “Where?” “As I just said, the banknotes. The bills. There were bills inside the victims’ stomachs yet again, weren’t there?” “Ah, riiiiight, yeah, those toy bills, eh. Huh, so that’s what they meant.” “Exactly. That is the second scenario Ueda Yuuko-san laid out.” “What do ya mean?” “She needed to make the case worthy of calling a great detective. And so she decorated the case. These bills are part of that decor.” “But this time it was toy money, not real cash.” “Maybe, ideally, Ueda-san would have wanted to use real money. However, fake money was enough. Her aim wasn’t to finally solve the three-year-old case; she simply wanted the great detective to follow her plans. So Yuuko-san only needed to allude to the existence of a copycat.” “Huh? What’s a copycat?” “A mimicry.” “What?” “A criminal who imitates other people’s crimes.” “’Kay, but why would anyone do that?” “Some might do it simply because they like the idea, but it’s not hard to imagine others doing it to make it seem like the original culprit did it and thus disturb the investigation and deductions.” “Huh. Yeah, we’re being kinda disturbed right now,” Sugano-san crossed his arms, then said, “I see, I guess that’s how it works. So what, now that there’s this...copycat? That great detective will come over?” “That was a crucial matter for Ueda Yuuko-san as well. Even after laying out the copycat, she was still unsure of herself.

Katou Junko-san's corpse should be discovered pretty easily—and it actually was—but Kurihara Yurika-san and Ueda Naoko-san's corpses might remain in the Higuchi house and rot there for a while. Then, only one corpse would come up, the case would fall short of having serial murders, and it would leave a weak impression. It might not be enough to fish out the great detective. And that would be problematic. With how little trust she had in the police, Ueda Yuuko-san wanted a great detective that would follow her scenario at all costs. But if the two corpses from the Higuchi house and the Kobayashi household's corpses were never found, Katou Junko-san's corpse alone might not be attractive enough for a great detective. With that worry in mind, Ueda Yuuko-san prepared a third scenario. To make the case a bit more attractive, in addition to the great detective she also summoned a serial murderer."

I returned the focus to the computer and clicked on another bookmarked site. A page called 'Voice of Heaven' appeared on the screen. I selected the 'murder requests' category which led to another page. There were many titles. This page was made out of multiple message boards, with each title leading to its own board. 'Obliteration nominee list!! (Nagano Prefecture Board)' 'Newbie psychopath: "Tokunaga Hideaki"' 'this is how you should kill' 'To Sir Round-and-Round Devil from Chofu, Tokyo' 'Junkie Funky Fights: Sodom Kill VS K☆o☆u☆j☆i' 'can anyone please kill this fucking guy (Ibaraki Prefecture Board)' 'Going on a murderer hunt～' 'A moron sent me a fax that says "I will kill in 1200 locked rooms this year"' 'Urgencies board' 'Farewell—Mourning Oota Katsushi' 'Serial killer in Shimane. Can anyone tell me wtf is "oof hooh haah"' 'Minami Q-Ta' 'I've checked - Part 14' 'Sucking My Own Dick Fan Club' 'Coming out as a genuine psycho killer' 'Report - Part 31' 'Kill famous people at random!' 'My expectations for the Crime Olympics' 'Hirano Keiichiro II in Saitama went too far' 'Countryside Challenges-Fukui-Let's get the Armageddon poppin at Uraran!' etc. Most of these were pranks, but some of them joked about real cases or doxxed people by posting murder requests—it was really in bad taste. I clicked on the '19 yo

Martyr' thread, then on 'Requests to 19 yo Martyr go here → (URL)' and searched for 'Fukui' in the new message board that came up, '19 yo Martyr: I'll kill as many people as I can this year.' I got a hit:

Nice to meet you. Like you, Martyr-san, I am from Fukui. I'm in a town called West Akatsuki. But nobody here has any worth, them being dead or alive doesn't make any difference. Not one person I could ever like. Maybe I'm just too sensitive, but too many people are straight up rotten to the core. I want everyone in this town to die. I've killed seven myself so far. I used a mitate of the first seven days of *Genesis* for those, so if you continue on that line it should all end up as my crimes. Please, Martyr-san, come to West Akatsuki and kill lots of people. Thank you in advance.

"What now?" Sugano-san sounded tired of all these surprises. "Huuuh? The heck? That's some outrageous stuff yet again..." He then made an inquisitive face and asked, "But if she wrote that here, wouldn't everyone just know?" "It's another case of reverse psychology," I said. "Ueda Yuuko-san hoped that the obvious question of 'Why did someone write that here?' would lead to 'If they wrote it in the open, it can't possibly be true.' Even if the murderer calling themselves Martyr existed and were to actually kill people in West Akatsuki, and then someone found this message board, they likely wouldn't take this message seriously." Sugano-san sighed and said, "It sure is complicated..." "That's how people obsessed with mystery novels think." "Hmm. Oh, and what's that thing with the *Genesis* mitate?" I took out the polaroids from my pocket and showed them to Sugano-san. They were pictures of the articles present where the corpses were found. The pile of soil and seeds next to Junko-san. The three lit desk lamps near Kurihara Yurika-san's pillow. The spilled bucket and the wet tatami next to Ueda Naoko-san. The Sun, Moon, and stars that were drawn on Kobayashi Sousuke's shoulders. The frozen mackerel and chicken wing stuffed inside Kobayashi Sachi-san's mouth. The votive tablets of sheeps, horses, and bovines crammed

inside Kobayashi Isamu-san's mouth. And two full-body pictures of Kobayashi Kazuko-san, who had no particularities aside from the scars on her stomach and jaw. I handed these eight polaroids to Sugano-san and explained:

"Christianity's Old Testament starts by retelling God's behavior during the first seven days in *Genesis*. On the first day God said, 'Let there be light,' and divided the day from the night. On the second day God said, 'Let there be water,' and created the sky and the ocean. On the third day He said, 'Let the dry land appear' and 'Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind,' and created the land. On the fourth day God said, 'Let there be lights in the firmaments of the heaven,' and created the Sun, the Moon, and stars. On the fifth day God said, 'Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life' and 'fowl that may fly above the earth,' and created fishes and birds. On the sixth day God said, 'Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth' and 'Let us make man,' and created beasts and humans. And on the seventh day, God rested."

Sugano-san looked at the polaroids while listening to me, dumbfounded. I explained:

"These pictures show the various items Ueda Yuuko-san used to construct the *Genesis* mitate. The desk lamps producing *light*, the bucket spreading its water like the vast *ocean*, the handful of soil and sunflower seeds to represent the *land* and *seeds*. The *Sun*, *Moon*, and *stars* were drawn as is. Ueda Yuuko-san could only prepare the mackerel and chicken wing for the *fishes* and *birds*, and the votive tablets for the *beasts*. And finally, to represent the *rest*, Kazuko-san was spared."

"Huh... I don't get it," Sugano-san said. "What's a mitate?"

Sugano-san didn't know what 'copycat' and 'mitate' meant. People who don't read mystery novels usually don't.

I explained to him what 'mitate' means. He then said, "Okay I get that part now. But why would anyone do that?" I answered, "The essence of making one thing look like another through a mitate is—as you can deduce from the fact that mitate are used in Japanese garden composition—to decorate. The bucket's spilled water was turned into the 'ocean' just like how garden stones are turned into 'Mount Fuji.' Resorting to a mitate consists of either using something concrete to conjure the image of another thing far away, or of projecting a far away image of one thing onto another nearby thing. In either case, the mitate hides the actual nature of an object beneath the image of something that is not present. If that cover up is a decor, then the essence of decor is concealment. Decorating something means concealing a part, a facet, an element of the thing that is to be decorated. When mitate are used in Japanese gardens, the object of concealment would be its 'smallness' or its 'limited space.' That's why garden stones are turned into Mount Fuji and ponds into the Sea of Japan, both much grander than the original object. Garden stones are never meant to be ants or crickets, and ponds are never meant to be a puddle of water after the rain or a droplet.

"In other words, mitate are attempts at concealing something's smallness, something's natural physical limits.

"So what are the smallnesses and limits concealed by mitate in mystery novels?

"That is the contents of the case. Someone was killed. But that happens all over the world—every day, every hour, every minute. It is but one of many deaths. Even when one tries to design a privileged death by using many tricks, since mystery novels are also commonplace, vanishing corpse tricks, teleportation tricks, and any tricks one can think of lose all privilege sought in them by existing inside mass-produced mystery novels. Ultimately, the human death is bound to be commonplace in one's daily life, in the special environment that is war, *and* in the fictional world of mystery novels

—it is but a small, puny death. It is a limited death.

"Only mitate have the power to conceal that smallness. They can change the human death's smallness into something much grander than what it actually is. That's why many authors like to use mitate based on biblical texts or famous fairy tales in their mystery novels. Big stories with great meaning to society—like those involving God's saving grace or God's punishments, those who touch upon human ethics—or stories that have become formulaic among many people—like Momotaro or Princess Kaguya. Overlapping them on top of an actual, tiny murder case aggrandizes the whole story as well as the death. The mitate using similarities with a previous case that Ueda Yuuko-san employed also sees common use in mystery novels. It works in the same way: By overlapping a previous case onto one that is currently happening, the current case sees its time, space, and social scale aggrandized and expanded into a multilayered structure.

"Humans are creatures that tend to hate 'being small,' 'having limits,' and 'being inconsequential.' That is why they see any kind of growth as a net positive, want to be recognized by others, and yearn for longevity or immortality.

"Likewise, the mystery novels those very people write hate 'being small,' 'having limits,' and 'being devoid of meaning.' That's why they employ mitate.

"However, to go further, for mystery novels that are genetically built to subvert conventions, mitate are no longer mere decorations. A concealment might only pretend to conceal something when it is in fact concealing another aspect, and when the concealed fact of a concealment comes to light, it always leaves the possibility that something else might also be concealed—thus is the fate of mystery novels. Mitate have become an accomplice in their complexity and are used in many ways.

"This is what Ueda Yuuko-san did as well—her mitate of *Genesis* wasn't mere decor. Its first application was to aggrandize the murder, its second was to summon a serial killer, and its third was to yet again induce the police in error regarding the murder order.

"She used the mitate of light and ocean, the first and second days

of *Genesis*, on Kurihara-san and Ueda Naoko-san, the third day's soil and seeds mitate on Katou Junko-san, and the fourth to seventh days' mitate on the Kobayashi household. Her aim by doing so was to reinforce the erroneous order from earlier.

"Ueda Yuuko-san acted all the more careful when committing these seven murders in this tiny settlement of Hiimagotani due to her cowardice, all the more bold due to her confusion, and all the more complex due to her being an avid mystery novel reader."

My explanation over, Sugano-san stared at the polaroids in silence, let out a sigh, then closed his eyes and crossed his arms without letting the photos drop before letting out a second sigh. "It's, how should I put it... You know..." he said, seemingly at a loss for what to say next.

I could have ended the day here, but I had more to do. I couldn't tag along with Sugano-san in Ueda Yuuko's bedroom until the sun set.

"Sugano-san, you can't sit back just yet. That Martyr might be coming to West Akatsuki with a plan in mind. They might even have met with Ueda Yuuko-san and be preparing something together. Ueda-san has already killed seven people, there's no telling what she'll do next. She might even be stricken by cowardice and be about to commit suicide. Arresting her and making her safe is the priority right now. Finding out more about that Martyr is also crucial. I'll now return to the Katou house to check on everyone, so please go on and continue the investigation, Sugano-san."

Sugano-san reacted with "Ah, yeah, right, I will," but still didn't move. I left him behind in Ueda Yuuko's bedroom. I descended the stairs and put on my sandals at the entrance. Upon leaving, I broke into a run. I had moved around all day and gotten better at timing the movements of my limbs, so I could now run.

Now, I needed to hurry.

Suzuki-kun was surely close by already.

Tsutomu was sitting on our bed in the Katou house's basement, waiting for me.

"Hi, Tsutomu, are you done talking to the police?" I asked. He nodded. My plan was to leave the house alone, but I was running late. I still had a chance, however. I really needed to get away from Tsutomu. I had a lot left to do.

"Is dad home yet?" I asked, to which Tsutomu shook his head. Katou-kun was still away. He must have heard about Junko-san's murder, so why was he so late? Had he maybe ran into Suzuki-kun on his way? That would be convenient. The more time Suzuki-kun stayed away for, the more time I had to escape.

"...Seshiru-kun and Serika-chan went away," Tsutomu said.

"I see," I said.

Tsutomu then asked, "Why did you do *that* for them?"

I asked him, "What do you mean, *that*?"

Tsutomu went silent. But he didn't hang his head. He was looking straight into my eyes—and not through the sunglasses I had already removed—with his eyes that uniquely didn't faint upon seeing me.

"Looks like you sometimes can't see me, onii-chan. I was there at Ueda-san's house and heard what you told everyone. I went home before the end, though. I searched around for Ueda Yuuko-san. And I found her."

He'd found her, huh. Well, not the biggest surprise.

Ueda Yuuko was heavy. Too heavy for me to move far away after she'd fainted. The best I could manage was pushing her down to the bathroom.

"...Mhm, ngh, *sniff*," Tsutomu cleared his throat and asked, "Uh, mhm, onii-chan, did you want to be part of the family *that much*?"

"It's not that I wanted to join the family," I answered. "I'm already part of it on the family register, you see."

"Gh, ugh, *sniff*, then why?" Tsutomu asked. "Mhm, d-did you really want Junko-san to have given birth to you?"

"Yes," I answered. "I wanted to be born from Junko-san."

"*Sniff*, ngh, d-doesn't that mean you, mhm, you wanted to be part

of the family?"

"It doesn't. I simply wanted to become Seshiru and Serika's sibling."

"Mmhm, *sniff*, mhm, but then, if you become siblings, y-you couldn't do *that* kind of stuff anymore, r-right? All the things Seshiru and Serika have done to you. You couldn't anymore, could you?"

"That has always been a taboo, for sure. But, and I think you can understand now, one cannot repress their sexual desires through common sense."

"Nngh, *sniff*, mhm, onii-chan, I have no idea what you're saying."

"You soon will."

"Eh? Mhm, s-so y-you, *sniff*, you're going to do the same things to me?"

"No, of course I won't. I would never do that to you, Tsutomu."

"Nhm, phew, th-thank god, *sniff*. I-I don't want to experience that."

"I imagine. Don't worry, Tsutomu. No one will ever do that to you."

"Mmhm, *sniff*, mhn, wh-why d-does that always happen to you, onii-chan? Why are you always, ngh, the one suffering?"

"Probably because I'm too beautiful, Tsutomu. I'm too beautiful to exist in this world."

Even though Seshiru and Serika had abandoned me.

"Mh, nghh, ah, mmhm, ngh, *sniff*, nhm. Nhn, *gasp*, phew, onii-chan, *sniff*, this is too unjust."

"I'm fine. Tsutomu, I'm doing fine."

"Ughhh, *gasp*, mhm, phew, onii-chan, mhn, when I become an adult, *sniff*, I will protect you at all costs, okay? Mmmhm, *sniff*, ngh, mmhm, *sniff*, I'll protect you, *sniff*, onii-chan, nnhn, okay?"

"Thank you, Tsutomu."

"Mmhn, onii-chan, I will g-go see you at, *sniff*, at the police station too."

I looked around for policemen trying to arrest me. There were none.

"Tsutomu, have you told the police what I did?"

He shook his head.

“I haven’t. *Sniff*, c-confessing your crimes yourself l-lowers your sentence, right? S-so, ngh, I wanted you to do that.”

“Tsutomu, I’m not going to talk to the police.”

Tsutomu was already swimming in tears, but me saying that broke the last wall that held him back from wailing aloud. “Waaah, waaaah. Mmmhm, waaaaaah. *Sniff*, nhn, mmhm, waaaaaaaah.”

“Don’t cry, Tsutomu. Others might hear you.”

“Waaaaaaaaaah. Please, onii-chan, please, let’s go see the police. *Sniff*, you’re still 13 years old, your sentence can’t be that long, please. Nhn, *sniff*, if we do it now you, *sniff*, you will be out in no time. Please, please. *Sniff*, waaaaaaaaaahhh.”

“I won’t go to the police. I’m going to escape. I still don’t know where I will go, but I’m going.”

“Waaaaaaaaahhh. Please, let’s go to the police~, please~.”

“I will go somewhere mom won’t be able to reach. I will hide there and try to have a normal life.”

“But I don’t wanna go there~. I don’t wanna, waaaaaa~aah. Ngh, *sniff*, mmnhn.”

“You don’t need to come, Tsutomu. The plan has always been for me to leave alone.”

Tsutomu clung onto me with a desperate expression.

“No, don’t! Don’t go! Don’t go! Onii-chan! Onii-chan! Please don’t! Please don’t! Please! Stay with me! Please! Fine! I won’t say anything to the police! So please! Waaaaaah! Please~. Waaaaaaah. *Sniff*, nhn. Please, nhm, *sniff*, please don’t go! Don’t go! Onii-chan, please!”

I grabbed Tsutomu’s shoulders and tried to slowly pull him away from me, but he put more strength in his warm arms wrapped around my body and didn’t budge.

“Please! Please! Onii-chan! Onii-chan! Waaah~. Ugh, *sniff*, mhn, guh, if I knew this would happen, *sniff*, I-I shouldn’t have noticed that in the workshed... Ngh, mnhn, uuugh. *Sniff*. I wish I hadn’t noticed and left you alone... Mmhn, *sniff*, waaaaaaaah!”

There is no way Tsutomu could have seen me lurking in the darkness behind that vagina when he was standing at the workshed’s

entrance. I was well-hidden inside Junko-san's stomach. The possibility of Tsutomu turning back after running away from the shed while I was being born from Junko-san's vagina and seeing me was also nil. I had been very careful about the workshed's entrance, and the birth had only lasted a few seconds.

"Ngh, *sniff*, nhmm. Waaaaaaah. Nhn, *sniff*, mhn, either that or I should have noticed you, onii-chan, and, *sniff*, peeled off Junko-san's body... Waaaah, ngh, *sniff*, waaaah. Waaaaaaah."

I was glad he hadn't done that. Or so I thought, but I didn't know if that was actually for the best. When Junko-san gave birth to me, Seshiru and Serika had already been reborn from Kurihara-san and Ueda Naoko-san. So I had lost three siblings at once.

"I'm sorry, Tsutomu. Your big brother is an idiot. Sorry."

"You really are! You, Seshiru, and Serika, you're all morons! Ngh, waaaaah, waah, morons! *Sniff*, uuugh, ngh. Nhn. Morons!"

"We really are. We're all morons."

"Say, *sniff*, onii-chan, did you mention what you were planning to do to Junko-san to Seshiru and Serika?"

"I didn't."

"Then why did you all do the same thing?"

"It must have been a coincidence," I said, then revised my thoughts. "No, maybe not. Children might always do the same thing when they want to be reborn. Maybe not just children—anyone wanting to be reborn might do the same thing."

"Mhhhn, *sniff*, mhnn. Killing a woman, entering her stomach, and coming out of her butt?"

I giggled. "We're not poop, we didn't come out of their butts."

Then, even Tsutomu who couldn't stop dirtying himself with snot when he was sobbing laughed a little.

But, I thought, there was no guarantee that Seshiru, Serika, and I weren't poop. Mitate are subjective, so our 'rebirth' was only one to us. Someone else might justifiably interpret us as poop or something else.

"I'm sorry Tsutomu. I really am." He hugged my head and put strength into it again before sobbing aloud some more.

“Onii-chan, you won’t take me with you?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“With just mom, dad, and you, things should go well, shouldn’t they?”

“…”

Tsutomu went silent. He knew that was the case.

“I’m better off staying alone.”

“But mom will be put back into prison.”

“And she will one day come out. When that finally happens I should rather not be with you.”

“But mom…will search for you.”

“And one day she will give up. I will go very far away and hide somewhere she won’t ever be able to find.”

“Okay, but you must come and see me. Onii-chan. Pay me a visit from time to time.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I will for sure.”

“It’s a promise.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t break it.”

“I won’t.”

“Then, fine, you may go. But onii-chan, um, what should we do about the woman in the bathroom?”

Right, I still had some more work to do.

I had to hide Ueda Yuuko and erase the data I’d left inside her laptop.

“You can try to hide her, but like, won’t they know what you did pretty soon anyway?” Tsutomu said. “The same goes for Seshiru-kun and Serika-chan. You must have left some hair inside Junko-san’s body.”

Oh, right, I thought. Hair, huh. True. Whatever. I only needed the time until I left this place. Also…

“Then let’s say that Ueda Yuuko was in possession of samples of my hair. We can make it that, despite running away, she was cunning enough to try to pin the crime onto me. Then my disappearing won’t

be because I ran away, but because Ueda Yuuko has killed me. That way mom should give up on me pretty quickly."

I said so with a smile that Tsutomu reciprocated. He also seemed a little afraid at how the truth could be decorated and concealed this easily.

He probably still wanted me to go to the police. That would give this situation a simpler end.

But I didn't want to do that and go to prison.

After all, I had spent 12 years living inside the Katou house's basement. I was sick of its smallness and limits.

I had run today.

I wanted to keep doing that.

Not by using mitate or other tricks. I wanted to go to a genuinely big world devoid of smallness and limits.

I was human, that desire was most natural.

I was no longer Gajobun. I could no longer endure living in a dark place underground.

For the moment, we needed to at least hide Ueda Yuuko, I thought and headed to our dedicated bathroom inside the basement. *I'll help you*, Tsutomu said and came along. I opened the door to Ueda Yuuko's small, or big (?) body—I wasn't sure what word to use—in either case, a heavy body.

Mm?

I noticed the anomaly.

Ueda Yuuko's big, round belly was moving.

Was she alive or not, again?

I didn't remember whether I had killed Ueda Yuuko or let her live.

But her stomach was moving so she had to be alive.

Still, these movements were bizarre.

As if someone was pushing against her stomach's skin from the inside.

I asked Tsutomu to grab my sports bag and bring it to me.

He left the bathroom and came back with it.

I grabbed it and took out the old Japanese sword I'd taken from

Seshiru.

I unsheathed the sword, *shwiiiing*, it was rather loud.

Something huge was moving inside Ueda Yuuko's belly. That something wanted to come out.

But I had no idea what was inside, and the fear of the unknown was paralyzing my body.

"Onii-chan, what's that? Something's moving inside."

I was frozen in place, the katana in hand.

"Seshiru-kun and Serika-chan went away, so who is it now?"

I didn't know.

"Maybe, instead of going away, they stayed and hid in there?"

I didn't know whether that was possible.

"Onii-chan, gimme that for a second."

Tsutomu took the katana from me, pressed the sword's tip against Ueda Yuuko's chest without showing an ounce of hesitation, shoved it in, and then sliced her belly open in one go. *Bleeemp*, Ueda Yuuko's big belly opened its mouth.

There was a curled-up old man inside. He had many wrinkles next to his closed eyes. Hollow, saggy cheeks. Slender shoulders, arms, and chest. A thin layer of white hair on his head. A pale skin covered by tiny blemishes under which we could see what appeared to be many healthy veins.

Who is that? That question never occurred to me.

That was me. An old Tsukumojuuku.

Above us, *Ding-dong*, the entrance's doorbell rang. The door rattled open and we heard a woman's voice. She was calling for my name.

That was mom.

She was here.

The old man inside Ueda Yuuko's belly screamed at the top of his lungs:

"HALLELUJAH!"

The judgment started and ended right then.

Episode 2
9+9+9
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

Despite my presence here being a secret, we received a call for me late at night. From somewhere in the darkness, at 4:35 in the morning, an electronic version of “The Sheltering Sky” that Azusa had set up rang. There were only the four of us in the room—me, Azusa, Izumi, and Neko—with Azusa being the closest to the phone, and yet Izumi, who was the furthest, gleefully stood up, ran to the phone, and picked it up.

“...Yes, who is it?” she asked. Azusa, her face still buried in the mattress, said, “Who could it be at this hour, gee~. I’ll kill them.”

“Yes, please wait a moment,” Izumi pressed her hand against the receiver and said, “Tsutomu-kun, it’s for you.” That made me open my eyes.

It was Suzuki-kun.

She had found me and would come for me.

I didn’t move from where I was so Izumi insisted, “Tsutomu-kun, get up, take the call.”

“Geez~, Tsutomu, go get it. Hurry~,” Azusa said too, but I still didn’t move.

“Here, Tsutomu-kun, take it.”

I grabbed the wireless phone Izumi handed me and spoke, “Yes?”

I had made sure that nobody could know of me being here.

“Am I speaking to Tsutomu-kun?” a man’s voice asked.

A man’s voice.

Not Suzuki-kun’s.

“...Yes. Who might you be?”

“I am Tsukumojuuku.”

“...”

“It has come to pass.”

“What? What did you say?”

The call ended there.

“Can you hear me?” I asked, but the man who’d taken up my name was no longer there.

“Can you hear me?” I asked a second time.

“Can you hear me?” A third time.

Azusa then said, “Shut up, Tsutomu. Go to sleep.”

I hung up the phone too.

I was Tsukumojuuku.

I had no clue as to what had come to pass.

Curious, I picked up the phone and stood up. “Where are you going?” Izumi asked. “I’ll call them back,” I replied and left the dark room.

I called the telephone company and asked them for the number that had last called me, then called that one. *Trrrrrrrr, trrrrrr*... It *was* ringing, at least. My call led somewhere. A phone was ringing out there. And next to that phone was the man who had called me while using my name. *Trrrrrrrr*... It kept ringing. Right when I was going to hang up and try again, the other end picked up their receiver.

“Hello, this is Kodansha’s Third Literary Department.”

“Ah, hello,” I said.

It was a different voice.

“How can I help you?”

“Um, I’m the person you called earlier.”

“Pardon?”

“I received a call from your end just minutes earlier.”

“Oh, I see. Excuse me, could you tell me what number you meant to contact?”

“03-53-95-35-06.”

“Oh, it really is this phone. Huh.”

“Excuse me, is Tsukumojuuku-san there with you?”

“Pardon? Ah, uh, could you repeat that name please?”

“Tsukumojuuku.”

“I see. I’m sorry, we don’t have anyone with such a name working here.”

“I see. I checked with the redial service that I had the right number, but...”

“Ah, that is unfortunate. However, you see, I am the only one present on my end. It’s already quite late, and everyone else has gone home. I’m simply here by chance because I had some work left to do.”

“There really is nobody else?”

“No, nobody. There are no lights on on the entire floor.”

“Kodansha is a publishing company, right?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Is that the only place this number could lead to?”

“Ah, yes. It is. There is just the phone currently on my desk—the one I’m using to speak to you—and two others nearby.”

“Is the floor spacious?”

“I would say so, yes, pretty spacious. Excuse me, could I have your name?”

“…”

“Well, either way, I am the only one around, and there is nobody called Tsukumojuuku either. There must have been an error somewhere. If you may excuse me now, goodbye~.”

“Ah, but please be careful.”

“Huh, what?”

“There is probably someone else. Someone hiding in the shadows. If possible, I suggest calling the guards and having them inspect the floor.”

“Uh… Oh please, don’t scare me. Hah hah hah. You don’t need to worry. I’m not sure if I should be telling you this, but Tsukumojuuku is fictional. He is pretty well made, but he remains fictional. He doesn’t exist in our world so you don’t need to worry. Have a good night, sir~.”

The call ended.

I hung up on my end too.

Tsukumojuuku is fictional.

He doesn’t exist in our world so you don’t need to worry.

That man was pretty bright and straightforward about it, but he was right. I no longer existed in this world. ‘Tsukumojuuku’ had always been a temporary name. I no longer existed.

Still holding up the receiver, I hung my head and stayed still. If I hadn’t been sleepy I might have cried a bit there. But I was, so I might not have been able to.

The bedroom door opened slightly and Izumi peeked through the

entrance.

"Tsutomu-kun, are you okay?"

I stood up.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Don't worry. I just got a weird phone call."

"What kind? Go to bed already."

"Yeah. Well, someone called and used my name."

"Huh? What, like 'Hello, I'm Tsutomu'?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"'I am Tsukumojuuku.'"

"..."

"Scary, right?"

"Yeah. I mean, isn't that a ghost? Like, seriously."

"..."

"Oh please. Now go to bed, Tsutomu-kun, come on."

"Sure."

I returned to the bedroom and got into Izumi's futon. Azusa then went "Hey~!" and joined us so we started having a threesome until Neko eventually woke up, said, "Hoh~, what's going on here, lemme join~," and participated. But she must've been really sleepy since she just went to sleep halfway through, still naked.

2

That night, the boys from Chofu, Tokyo, who were frantically writing on message boards partook in a massive pandemonium—commonly called Armageddon—which continued until noon. At around one in the afternoon, Oota Katsushi-san from the Kodansha Third Literary Publishing Department, who found himself in Chofu for work-related reasons, was assaulted by seven middle schoolers. After being violently kicked and punched by them, he was urgently transported to a hospital where he passed away. That's what I heard from the police. They had called me because my number had remained in the phone on Oota's desk, which he was working at until right before heading to Chofu. There was even a memo saying 'Got a suspicious call! Was at 4＋½ AM~' I had received a strange call early

in the morning. The interlocutor hung up immediately so I searched for their number and called back to confirm who they were. I then had a conversation with a man whose name I didn't know but who seemed to match with Oota's profile. I told the police about this chain of events. They told me, "I see, thank you, we'll contact you again if anything comes up," and hung up.

Hearing about the call I'd just had, Izumi said, "Woooah, Tokyo's so scary. I don't wanna go back there yet~."

"That's because idiots keep looking at that stupid Voice of Heaven thing," Azusa said. "On the other hand, you just can't know that Armageddon's happening if you aren't looking at it... Yeah, anyway, I feel super bad for that guy. He kinda died because he's a normal dude who doesn't look at Voice of Heaven, right?"

"True~."

"So I'll read it. I just don't wanna die. Better be an idiot than dead."

"Azusa, you're simply dying to read the logs, aren't you?"

"I mean, Armageddon is such a mess. You got brats doing whatever the hell they want. And like, the reporting threads are mega scary. It's a hassle with all the filler posts, but it's worth with how much dumb stuff happens," Asusa said, opening her laptop.

Izumi lost all interest, went back to rolling on her futon she still hadn't put away, and continued reading Hiroki Azuma's *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* despite having no interest whatsoever in otaku or the surrounding culture.

Neko was out for work.

I stood up, went to the kitchen, and prepared lunch for three. The sauté of chicken meat avec taro and the miso soup ready, I called them and Azusa came over. Izumi had fallen asleep, her fingers keeping open the book she had been reading. I wanted to wake her up but Azusa kept clinging to me. As Azusa was giving me a blowjob in the kitchen, the phone rang.

3

It was Neko.

“Ah, hey~, is it Tsutomu-kun?” “Yeah.” “Can you talk right now?” (Azusa was still sucking me off but,) “Yeah, no problem.” “Well, you see, I’ve got a weird case on my hands.” “Okay.” “So I wondered if I could ask you for ideas, do you mind?” “Not at all.” “I’m in Namerikawa right now, in a residential area a bit removed from the city proper. We’ve found a burnt corpse here.” “Yeah.” “And it turns out, that person burned while still alive. The police already checked, there’s no doubt about it.” “Mm.” “This is kinda turning into a horror story but listen: There was a girl walking behind a man. They weren’t acquaintances or anything, they simply happened to be walking in the same direction on the same street.” “Okay.” “And like, the area was silent as a grave and there weren’t any other paths, so the girl tried to keep her distance by walking slower and all.” “Yeah.” “So the girl kept walking behind the man, and she was going straight, but then the man turned a corner.” “Yeah.” “The girl was relieved that he’d gone onto another street, but when she arrived at that junction, trying to go straight, she saw that the man from earlier had suddenly burst into flames, like his entire body audibly blazing, and he started running after her! Ain’t that scary?” “It is.” “So the girl got scared and ran away, but the man, still burning, spread both arms out and chased after her! Right when she thought he was going to catch her...the man collapsed behind her and stopped moving entirely.” “Hmm.” “So yeah, I don’t get the part where he suddenly burst into flames.” “Okay. You checked the man and the girl’s belongings, right?” “Yeah. The man didn’t have so much as a match or a lighter on him. Neither in his bag nor in his suit.” “Did you check what the suit was made out of?” “It’s a normal, commercially-available one. It’s made of wool, cupro, and polyester. By the way, we obviously checked for any traces of fuel on his clothes and there was nothing.” “I see. And there was no fuel or anything suspicious in their surroundings?” “Nope. If there were, I wouldn't be asking you.” “True.” “Also, it would be pretty hard for a third party to do it. The street the man ignited on was a straight path. There are houses on the sides, but the street itself goes straight for some distance before any junction. We tested ourselves how much time it must’ve taken for the girl to reach where she could see the man

after he'd turned, and it's about five seconds. There were about ten meters between them, and the man was ten meters into the next street after turning, so if he'd kept a constant pace there shouldn't be any time left to do the deed, right? The only way to make any time would be if the man broke into a dash right after turning and bumped into the culprit who hastily set him on fire before escaping godspeed. But that would still be five, or ten seconds at most, it's still not quite enough. There are no traces of anyone using a bike or any other vehicle, and the girl walking behind didn't hear anything like that either. Instead, she heard a small sound that went like, *book*. She says she heard it around the same time as the scream. But I have no idea what that *book* might be from." "You did inspect the surroundings of where the man burned, right?" "Who do you take me for... He ignited next to a surrounding house's fence, but there was nothing. We even asked that house's residents to investigate their garden but there weren't any fuel containers the culprit might have thrown. Also, it was a grid fence and there was nowhere to hide. So I can't imagine the culprit hiding there to ambush the man. It's seriously a locked room situation." "A locked room and a *book*... Investigate that man's relationships and how impossible the situation was. If that doesn't give you any idea, then I'll tell you my thoughts on the case. For starters, check on these two things." "We already did that~. The man didn't have any notable enemies, and the situation is as impossible as it can be in my head~." "Don't be stupid, Neko, an impossible situation refers to something that simply cannot happen in the real world, so it's something that hasn't happened. But here we have something that has happened, which means it's not impossible. It's a possible situation. There must be a way for it to occur." "Then how did it happen?" "From what you have told me, I have seven ideas." "Eh, what? Seven? Please share!"

"The first would be an anomaly in the witness' sense of distances, space, and time. That something went wrong with her cognition of distances, space, and time in that specific situation. In other words, despite thinking she was close to the victim, she was actually far away, and despite thinking she reached the corner soon after the

victim broke it, a fair amount of time had actually passed. Then a third party could have set the victim on fire and ran away with time to spare. That's the first idea.

"There's also the possibility that the girl cannot distinguish between reality and her delusions: The victim had never actually walked in front of that girl. It doesn't matter where he came from, the point is, he was set on fire and killed on that street. The girl *then* passed by and discovered the corpse. Her state of panic instantly made many scenarios emerge inside her mind, one of which she chose to believe and would retell to the police and great detectives—you in this case. That's the second idea."

"Eh~..."

"Furthermore, the man might have committed suicide in a way unknown to anybody else with a chemical nobody else knows about. Then there wouldn't be a culprit, so no need to think about an escape route. That's number three."

"Huh? A way unknown to anybody else? A chemical nobody else knows about? So what are these, concretely?"

"Nobody else knows about them, so I don't know either."

"The heck, shut up. That's meaningless~."

"It has meaning. Our knowledge is bound to have limits. We need to know that. Being convinced that you know everything is true ignorance. Whatever, anyway, that was the third idea.

"The next one is that there actually was a culprit who set the man on fire using chemicals nobody else knows about, then escaped in a way unknown to anybody else."

"Tsutomu, that just means you don't know what chemicals and escape routes were used, right?"

"Yeah. That's the fourth idea.

"Next: Actually, the victim caught on fire spontaneously."

"Ehhh? What? Why say it like it's an everyday occurrence?"

"Well, there have been many reports of spontaneous human combustions all around the world. Quite a few examples remain in official documents in England and some other countries. They report people suddenly bursting into flames. They burn at a really high

temperature and even reduce bones to ashes. You know that bones remain when someone is burned at a crematorium, don't you? They need a temperature higher than 3,000°C to burn down. And that kind of heat just pops up inside someone's body and burns them. Many of the cases don't see the fire spread any further after immolating the body. Some cases even claim that the victim's clothes didn't burn."

"Eh~. That's scary. Why does it happen?"

"The common theory is because our bodies are close to candles."

"What, so it can happen to me too?"

"Yeah."

"Huh? Come on, gee..."

"But candles require an intense source of heat to start burning, so if our bodies acted like candles then they would also need an external source of heat. So it doesn't explain how a body could spontaneously light on fire."

"Huh. Then what, it's impossible?"

"It just means that the candle theory is insufficient to fully explain SHC. I still don't know what could explain it. My pet theory would be that the cause lies in the human consciousness. You know, since humans are prone to fall for hypnosis and suggestions. Just like how a hypnotized subject suffers from burns upon being told they were in contact with fire when they were actually touching ice, if someone who believes themselves to be burning conjures a strong and meticulous image of themselves burning, then they might just burn."

"Scary~."

"That's the fifth idea. Next is the opposite—the possibility that the culprit had pyrokinesis."

"Piro-what? Does it have anything to do with pilots?"

"No. Pyrokinesis is a kind of psychic ability. With it, one can set an object on fire even without touching it."

"That's something that exists?!"

"It is. There are a few examples of it."

"If psychic abilities are a thing then great detectives are powerless~."

"If the role of great detectives is to be aware of every factor that

can exist and choose the one truth among all the available possibilities, then that is already impossible. As I said earlier, human knowledge has its limits. There are things we don't know of. Since great detectives are humans, they don't know everything and cannot review all the possibilities in the true sense of the word. Haven't I told you many times, Neko? You only need to resolve the case you have on your hands. Reaching a conclusion is more important than reaching the truth. You only need to allow the people involved to return to a normal life."

"Sure, sure. Psychic abilities, huh. I guess it's a possibility."

"Yes, it is. So that was the sixth one. The last and seventh idea is that the witness is lying. Why? Because she is the culprit. She set that man on fire herself and is lying to the police and to you."

"Ehhh~. I doubt it. I mean, if she was lying she wouldn't have made up an impossible situation."

"Impossible situations cannot be made up due to their impossibility. Only possible situations exist, naturally. Well, that aside, what you are saying makes sense, Neko. But because of how much sense it makes, that kind of premise gets taken apart by people familiar with mystery-novel logic."

"I lost track of what you're saying..."

"In other words, as you said, if one were to lie, they would have come up with something more believable. But since that logic is so predictable, they might purposefully come up with an unreasonable lie."

"Here it is~. Again with that argument, Tsutomu... If you keep going down the hole you can never know the truth like that~."

"Exactly. That's simply another reason why it's impossible for great detectives to know the truth. Give up, Neko. Nobody cares to know the truth."

"Great detectives won't have a reason to be if you say that~."

"I'm going to state the same logic and the same conclusion as always, but the result of having reached the truth isn't what makes one a great detective. Because, ultimately, the truth is always out of reach. The general appraisal of someone's will, actions, and progress

at various points of the process is what, by a purely coincidental mechanism, makes them a great detective."

"Uuuugh~. Here he goes again."

"And I will repeat myself again: That's why calling yourself a great detective is ludicrous. No greats pronounce themselves greats of their own accord. Eminent people are not that insolent, they don't seek to be admired by others. People start respecting them on their own, spontaneously. It's like literature. As you can tell from the expression 'being literary,' literature is used as praise. Calling your own novels literature is equivalent to calling yourself eminent: it is arrogant. Likewise, the title of great detective is praise, so one is not to call themselves as such. That is the bare minimum of decency people should have."

"He's even lecturing me~... I get it now. That's all you had to say?"

"It is."

"Mm~? Don't tell me you chose that order just so you could lecture me..."

"I need to repeat myself whenever I can."

"Piss off."

"It's in my nature to be easily hated."

"You're saying that because you actually think that's not true, aren't you?"

"Well, I'm saying it knowing you would reply with that."

"And you saying that means you actually...whatever, I give up. You piss me off."

"It is true that I—"

"Shut up!"

"Ah, right, my bad. Well, you've heard the extent of my ideas."

"So which of the seven seems most right to you?"

"I can't choose. Had I been near the victim when he started burning and observed him myself, then I could give you a factual retelling of the events, but sadly..."

"I mean, of course...well, enough with that. Ah~, this is so stupid. Why am I asking you when you never help me figure out the truth

anyway…”

“That’s because you are searching for the truth. Aim for a conclusion instead. Pick any of the seven options I’ve given you and say that’s what actually happened.”

“Here you go again~. I have no proof, you know?”

“Proof? Just make it up yourself. Then at least you would know the truth. Since you’d be responsible for it.”

“Geez~. And what should I do if the actual truth differed? Wait, I feel like we’re repeating what we said last time.”

“Then resolve the case one more time. Cases are resolved iteratively to begin with. Not all at once.”

“Whatever. Geez~, I’m not sure if you helped or just killed my motivation.”

“Could you send the photos of the crime scene to my PC? I’ll at least look through them.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Please do.”

“Leave it to the Great Detective Tsutomu.”

“Mm? I thought you shouldn’t call yourself a great detective?”

“It’s fine when you have full confidence that you’re the real deal or when you say it as a joke.”

I hung up.

We finished having oral sex and Azusa started eating lunch.

Izumi was still sleeping.

I pulled my pants and underwear up, then went to wake Izumi up.

After finishing the meal, washing the tea cups, and putting them away in the cupboard, I booted up my laptop behind Azusa and Izumi, who were watching the TV, opened the newly-received email titled, ‘The case files from the Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan~ ← it’s a joke so cut me some slack,’ and had started checking the attached text and image files when our entrance’s doorbell rang.

“Ah, I’ll go,” Izumi stood up, walked to the front door, and came back. She was holding an A4-size envelope. It was pretty thick. “Seems like it didn’t fit in the postbox,” Izumi said as she handed it to me. I grabbed it. *Plop*, it bent quite heavily. It was paper. A lot of it.

And my name was written on the envelope. ‘Tsutomu-sama.’ It didn’t have my last name. Because I didn’t have one. The address was correct. So this envelope was indeed meant for me. But I didn’t know who—other than Azusa, Izumi, and Neko—could be aware that I was residing here. With this and last night’s phone call, it seemed my location had somehow been leaked.

It would soon be time for me to move away.

Once again, alone.

I opened the envelope missing its sender’s name. As I thought, it contained paper; a printed-out version of a manuscript typed on a word processor software. The topmost sheet of paper had a title and a name.

Episode One - Seiryouin Ryuusui

I didn’t know what ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ meant. Apart from it simply being a word I wasn’t aware of, I could imagine five possibilities regarding this arrangement of characters. The first would be the existence of a room called Ryuusui inside of a hospital named Seiryouin. The second would be that ‘Ryuusui’ straight up referred to a flow of water that’s relatively famous for the locals around the Seiryouin Hospital but that I wasn’t aware of. The third would be that Sui represented a sort of art, like Tea, Writing, and Flowers, and it was one such school of the Seiryouin Style. The style of ‘water’ within that style. The fourth would be that someone typed randomly on a keyboard and ended up with these characters. And lastly, that it was a typo of another word.

Reading *Episode One* in its entirety still didn’t elucidate the meaning of ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui.’ What I got out of it, however, was that someone knew about part of my early days in pretty great detail. That someone being the person who had called me using my name last night and the person who had sent me this manuscript. It was equally

likely for them to be the same individual as it was for them to be two different people. Anywhom, be it one person, two people, or more, someone knew about my past and my location. I didn't know whether Suzuki-kun was one of these people.

What I couldn't understand was the reason for the lies present in the story; the reality depicted in *Episode One* was mainly misrepresented by two big lies. The first one was Ueda Yuuko's crimes within the story. In reality, Katou Seshiru and Serika had killed Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko, and that was it. In this story it seemed like I had murdered Junko-san, sliced her belly open, entered it, and left through her vagina to create a mitate of me becoming Junko-san's child, but that depiction was a deceit. What had really happened was that Seshiru and Serika murdered Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko to become the children of someone other than Junko-san through a mitate, and decapitated Junko-san in her bedroom before throwing out her torso inside the forest (her head hadn't been found to this day). So Junko-san's stomach was intact, Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko's organs were piled up next to their bodies in the Higuchi house, no *Genesis* mitate took place, Ueda Yuuko was slender and definitely not a mass murderer since she still lived in West Akatsuki, and I didn't know whether the Kobayashi family existed but at the very least they hadn't been killed in the way depicted inside this story.

But the scene where I questioned Seshiru and Serika was portrayed faithfully. I had marked them with a katana.

However, I hadn't told anyone about that. Which meant that Seshiru and Serika, or just one of them, told it to someone, and that this someone—who might alternatively have been hiding inside the house at the time and listened to our exchange—had written this story. In which case, 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' might not be part of the title but the name of the person who wrote this.

I stood up. I would leave this place right away. I had a bag full of clothes ready in my closet. I still had about seven thousand yen left from when I left Fukui, since at the time I just took a slow train to this city in Toyama where Azusa picked me up and I'd stayed until now. I still had the Castle of Illusions file and the katana inside the bag.

I entered the bedroom, opened the closet, took out my bag, zipped it open, and was checking that everything was still in there when I heard Izumi's voice coming from the living room.

"Ohoh, why~? Say, Tsutomu-kun, why do we have a Seiryouin Ryuusui book lying around?"

I froze up in front of the bag.

"Wait, isn't this a manuscript? Is this what that envelope was? But why~? Are you two acquaintances?"

"Not at all," I said. I put the bag down on my futon and left it in the closet. "No idea who that is. You know him?"

"Of course~. He's super famous. Well, in a niche."

I didn't understand what she meant, but I came back to the living room, empty-handed.

"Who is he?"

"An author. He's really insane," Izumi said, gleeful. "At first he was writing Ryuusui World Novels, but that changed to Noveller, which then developed into Personovels/Personotenough, then Novella Can't Tell Ya, then Canno-t-vel, and now he's at I'm Not Tellin' You A Wor(l)d Anymore, I think? He's been evolving really quickly lately."

"I don't get a word you're saying."

"Nah, that's normal, the current Ryuusui style is I'm Not Lettin' You Make Sense of It."

"..."

"Yeah, that's better. Not understanding *is* the right move. That's how he should be read. Though currently, according to the man himself, not reading at all would be correct, but, since following the correct method is mistaken in itself, not reading would also be a mistake, so reading is actually the right move, but as I said at the start it's also a mistake so you shouldn't read!"

"...So what should I do?"

"Maybe open a book and stare blankly at it? I don't really know, I'm a pretty diligent reader."

"...Does he have a lot of readers?"

"Yeah, a ton. But they're not readers, they're called serpents."

"..."

“You know, the evil snake who deceived Eve in the story of Adam and Eve. So the apple it gave to Eve was a Ryuusui novel. In other words, Ryuusui isn’t the one giving the apple, it’s us, the ones buying his books, that give Ryuusui the apple.”

“You’re not making a shred of sense.”

“Yeah, henceforth the I’m Not Lettin’ You Make Sense Of It.”

“…”

Trying to follow this any longer would be a waste of time, so I connected to the internet and searched for ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui.’ As Izumi had said, his recent growth seemed to be the subject of talk among many people who would outline the main changes between his styles, from Ryuusui World Novels to I’m Not Tellin’ Ya A Wor(l)d Anymore. A certain page informed me that the Kodansha Third Literary Publishing Department was publishing paperback editions of Seiryouin Ryuusui’s novels. Another page wrote that ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ was both a play on ‘Seiryou in Ryuusui,’ meaning ‘fresh water in a stream,’ and on ‘Seiryouin Ryousui;’ the latter of which meaning soft drinks. On yet another page I learned that Seiryouin Ryuusui’s real name appeared to be Kanai Hidetaka. And that, back when he was writing Ryuusui World Novels, his works contained a great detective character called Tsukumo Juuku.

Same for Inugami Yasha.

Also for Kirika Mai.

According to my research, the ‘God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku’ is a meta detective who solves cases using Divine Connection, his deduction method. Divine Connection apparently means that he instantly reaches the truth the very moment he finds himself with the minimum required amount of information to do so. In other words, he only has to collect information and doesn’t really do any deducing. Well, in my opinion ‘reaching the truth’ is inherently impossible, so if I were to use this ‘God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku’ character, I would have him perpetually collect data without ever reaching the truth in a never-ending novel. The idea that ‘the book’s culprit = the author’ and thus ‘understanding the author’s intention = making a

meta deduction' is probably wrong. In reality, the 'God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku' only makes a 'meta deduction' in the sense that he 'understands the intention' of 'the author = Seiryouin Ryuusui.' Seiryouin Ryuusui uses the device he calls 'God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku' to diegetically indicate whatever he wants to leave as the truth. He is always 'right' and 'never errs' only because of his nature as a device. However, this is pretty much the same relation that exists in most mystery novels between their great detectives and the authors they are named after. I could tell that most people had already figured that out by reading through articles on the web. So he was just a normal great detective. I found an article saying that 'his fate is to be murdered on the last day of the twentieth century,' and pondered over that. The 20th century was long over. Which meant 'Tsukumo Juuku' wasn't me. Obviously. But here it said that he'd solved the Castle of Illusions Murder Case, reinforcing my conviction that this Seiryouin Ryuusui person either knew a whole lot about me, Seshiru, and Serika, or that he'd heard about us from someone who did.

'Kirika Mai' apparently uses a deduction method called Deduction by Elimination. I didn't get how it was any different from using the process of elimination, a standard logical method. It probably meant that she was thorough in using the process of elimination? What grabbed my attention was the info that her birth was a mystery and that Tsukumo Juuku had saved her life during a certain fiendish case. My mind mercilessly made the parallel that Kirika Mai = Katou Serika, which made this article almost look like a legitimate prophecy.

I looked up 'Inugami Yasha.' His method of deduction is Wisdom of Insomnia. He thinks with all his might without sleeping. I found a lot that intrigued me. Inugami Yasha has apparently been entrusted with a hint to Humanity's Last Case which is meant to occur right after the Tsukumo Juuku Murder Case. Said hint to Humanity's Last Case being a black cat, who is furthermore named 'Kanaihidetaka.'

All of this meant that meeting Seshiru would probably lead me to Seiryouin Ryuusui. Either Seshiru had told ‘Kanai Hidetaka’ about us, or he was operating both as ‘Inugami Yasha’ and ‘Kanai Hidetaka’ while using the pen name ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui.’ Either way, ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ had sent me this *Episode One* manuscript.

The time might have come to wield that katana a second time.

However, someone else had already wielded another katana. Ueda Yuuko had died of a single sword stroke that had sliced her belly open, leaving her naked corpse to float inside her home’s blood-filled bathtub. Inside Ueda Yuuko’s open belly was the skull of Junko-san, which had never been found until then.

5

The person who had called me, knew my name, and presented himself as ‘Tsukumojuuku’ had told me that ‘It was a success.’ I still didn’t know what ‘it’ was. Regardless, it was clear that something had worked out according to someone’s expectations. That crossed my mind upon being informed of Ueda Yuuko’s death. As for whose expectations had been answered, that would probably be mine. At the very least, that ‘Tsukumojuuku’ thought that I had some kind of ‘expectations.’ But I didn’t know what these ‘expectations’ entailed.

I had never held any expectations towards anything in life.

I learned of Ueda Yuuko’s death through the TV Azusa was watching.

The 2 PM infotainment program cut into a news section halfway through, which they introduced by saying, ‘We have just received these images from Fukui TV,’ before showing us a pre-recorded video. It opened with a reporter saying they were in West Akatsuki, Fukui. That got me to turn back and look at the TV. In a corner of the screen were the words ‘Relay Broadcasting from Fukui TV’ while the big title was ‘A Great Detective Appears!? West Akatsuki Female Belly Slicing

Decapitation Murder Case.'

"Oh, someone's at the right place at the right time," Izumi said. "A great detective, huh."

The young female reporter was hastily reading a script with great enthusiasm. It succinctly explained the gist of the case, how the police investigation had started, and how much 'that small village in the Fukui Prefecture' was panicking over it. The reporter then said, "Right then, two young men appeared at the scene and resolved the case before the officers' eyes in record time. Fukui TV has captured part of their feats, have a look."

We switched to another video. Police officers were moving around behind a yellow tape. This was indeed Hiimagotani in West Akatsuki. We were shown Ueda Yuuko and Naoko's house which was right nearby the Katou house. The concrete-filled lot housed a two-floor, Japanese-style house, a workshed, a storehouse, and an old outdoor toilet. Some police cars were messily parked on the concrete. The reporter was commenting on the situation in front of the tape while officers were working in the background when a tall man passed right by it. That man was followed by a boy with a buzz cut wearing a school uniform.

I felt like something living inside me panicked and began coiling a string around my heart. I couldn't breathe right. My eyes were nailed to the screen.

That buzz cut boy was Tsutomu.

Tsutomu and that tall man were about to cross the yellow tape, headed straight for the Ueda house, so the officers in the background, the reporter in the foreground, and the other media workers were taken aback. We could hear people questioning what was happening all around. The man passed one leg over the tape before taking something from his chest pocket and showing it to the police. The uniform-wearing officer that was keeping the man away by almost thrusting at his chest took a step back. The man let his other leg past the tape. Tsutomu followed him and passed under the tape. The two of them left the officers behind and entered the Ueda house. The screen faded to black as a narration kicked in: "At five past 12 PM, a

man claiming to be a great detective and his young assistant entered the crime scene," before switching to a special interview with a plainclothes officer that was investigating. "Huh? Even we can't go in right now," the officer complained. After a '15 minutes later' caption, the camera hurriedly moved when someone from the media crew screamed "Oh, they're coming out!" The press corps flocked to a specific patrol car. The reporter hastily spoke into the microphone, "We have just received new information. Ten minutes ago, a young girl thought to be a prime suspect was found hiding inside the Ueda premises. She confessed to her crimes after a five-minute conversation with the man claiming to be a great detective, and will now leave the house to be escorted to the Fukui Police's headquarters! We have received intel that the girl thought to be a suspect is 13 years old and is currently in her first year of middle school! Ah! She is coming out!" The tall man from earlier came out. He was now in a business shirt since his jacket was covering the upper half of the child next to him, leaving only her gray skirt, white legs, black socks, and black shoes visible. "Mister Great Detective!" "Congratulations on your amazing feat, Mister Great Detective, do you have any comments?!" "Please look this way!" various cameramen and reporters screamed at him, but the man paid no heed to that, helped the girl inside the patrol car, and sat next to her. Two policemen in civilian clothes got inside the driver and front passenger seats, started the car, and left the press corps in the dust. "The man presumed to be a great detective and the girl thought to be a suspect departed for the Nanjo Police Station in a patrol car. We thought we had missed the opportunity to question the great detective..." a voice narrated over the images. "But then..." The camera turned around in a hurry. Tsutomu was standing between two plainclothes officers. He was moving his hands up and down in manner to tell the press corps to calm down. "Um~, nice to meet you all," he said. It had been a long time since I'd heard his voice. It hadn't even started to change yet. "Everyone, nice to meet you," he said again. "Please quiet down, I will now explain what went down during this case. Due to a concern of evidence being destroyed, I cannot reveal all the details, but I will tell you the gist of it." A woman from

the press corps who all had their cameras and mics pointed at Tsutomu asked him, “Mister Assistant, excuse me, could you first tell us the name of the great detective?!” “Oh, the tall guy who entered the patrol car *is* the assistant,” Tsutomu replied. “I’m the great detective, and my name is Daibakushou Curry.”

The culprit’s name was not disclosed as she was a minor. That girl had a dog. Earlier this year, in spring, she took it on a walk to a nearby shrine and continued for a bit in the mountain path behind it when the dog picked up a scent and kept sniffing at a certain spot. Curious, the girl dug there and found Junko-san’s head. The girl buried it back and resumed walking the dog. She didn’t tell anyone about Junko-san’s head. Eight months later, this very morning, as the girl played hooky and left her house to play around, she ran into her neighbor Ueda Yuuko, got into an argument over something silly, snapped, and stabbed Ueda Yuuko with the knife she had in her possession. Seeing that Ueda Yuuko was lying inert on the ground, the girl kicked her down to the nearest water ditch. Nobody had witnessed this happening. The girl went back home to change from her bloody clothes. She was still planning on going out to play around at the time. However, she then took a look at her knife and realized that the blade had broken off. That blade had her name carved out on it. She felt pressed to find it. 15 minutes after having returned home, now with new clothes, the girl came out of her house onto the crime scene and searched for the broken blade, but couldn’t find it anywhere. She checked the ditch on a hunch and saw that Ueda Yuuko was still there. At this point in time Ueda Yuuko was still alive. The girl looked at Ueda Yuuko’s stomach, saw a cut of about three centimeters in length, and realized that her knife’s blade was inside that cut. She inserted her fingers to try and pluck it out when Ueda Yuuko, seemingly passed out, woke up and screamed. The girl backed off her hands and helped Ueda Yuuko stand up. She told her to endure the pain, enter the empty Ueda House, and go change her clothes while she would call for an ambulance. Ueda Yuuko told her she couldn’t remove her clothes, so the girl helped get her undressed. The

girl then accompanied Ueda Yuuko to the bathroom, filled the bath with hot water, and put her inside with the pretext of cleaning her wound. She then lied about going to get new clothes on the second floor, and instead headed for the kitchen where she grabbed a knife before coming back to the bathroom where Ueda Yuuko had once again passed out. The girl pressed the kitchen knife against the existing wound and prolonged the cut both up and down across Ueda Yuuko's stomach. While doing so, she was careful about having the cut travel from the bottom left to the upper right of her stomach. Ueda Yuuko was now dead and the girl managed to remove the blade from her stomach. The girl then started disguising the corpse to look like a suicide.

She first had Ueda Yuuko hold the knife with her right hand. She knew that Ueda Yuuko was right-handed, and that's precisely why she had made the cut travel from the left part of her torso up to the right part of her torso.

She then waited for a time when nobody would be outside, left the Ueda House, entered the premises of the shrine where she had found Junko-san's head back in spring, and dug it back out. She hid the head inside her jacket, ran back to the Ueda house, and stuffed the cranium that had been reduced to mere white bones inside Ueda Yuuko's open belly.

The girl thought that this would create the illusion that Ueda Yuuko had sliced her own belly open to put the head inside. She hadn't realized that the discrepancy between the damage to the organs dealt from the initial knife's stab and from the kitchen knife when spreading the wound would reveal the origin of that cut.

The girl then cleaned the path from the entrance to the bathroom that Ueda Yuuko had walked through while dripping wet, put away the cleaning utensils, entered Ueda Yuuko's bedroom on the second floor, and started working on a fake will.

Here is the scenario the girl drew up: Actually, the murders of Kurihara Yurika, Ueda Naoko, and Junko-san from last year were my, Ueda Yuuko's, doing. I was also the one who placed hair from Seshiru and Serika inside of Kurihara and Ueda's bodies, all with the goal of

pinning my crimes onto them. I had romantically loved Junko-san for many years and always hoped I could someday make her mine, but when Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko learned of my secret feelings and started teasing me for it, I killed them both on impulse, sliced their bellies open, and removed their organs. But I was afraid of being arrested, so I got the idea of blaming Seshiru and Serika, collected hair from them, and placed them inside Kurihara and Ueda's wounds. However, realizing and brooding over the fact that having her children be arrested would cause Junko-san big problems and enormous emotional distress, I ended up cutting off Junko-san's head the next day, bringing it back home, and hiding it. I would sometimes take her head out and look at it. At some point I started being visited in the middle of the night in my bedroom by Junko-san's headless ghost. Junko-san's ghost was searching for her head. I have endured that ghost's presence for over a year, but I cannot take it anymore so I will commit suicide. But I don't want to be separated from Junko-san's head so I will hide it inside my own stomach so that the ghost won't find it.

When she had finished fabricating this will, Ueda Yuuko's father came home, discovered the corpse inside the bathroom, and caused a huge commotion. The girl had lost her chance to escape from the Ueda house, so she hid herself.

"If I did anything worth being called a great detective over, that would be finding the suspect girl's whereabouts," Tsutomu said. "She was hiding in quite the tricky spot."

The girl had taken refuge inside Ueda Naoko's bedroom. The spot where she hid, however, was both inside and outside that bedroom.

Some people from the press corps randomly guessed she was inside a drawer, inside a closet, behind the ceiling, under the bed,

inside the bed, and such. There was also the idea of getting rid of all the books from a shelf row except for the spines, assembling those into a single sheet of paper, lying down on that row, and using the spine patchwork to cover herself.

“That trick might have been more becoming of a mystery novel, yes. But that is sadly not what happened. The suspect chose to hide behind the wall. She pulled the bed and bookshelf away from the windowless wall, then used the blade part she had retrieved from Ueda Yuuko-san’s stomach to cut off that entire side of the wallpaper. She then reused it to create a fake wall by anchoring it with pushpins and hid inside the narrow double bottom. Ueda Naoko-san’s bedroom hadn’t been touched since the case from last year, with her family barely entering it, so the father did not notice that the bed and shelves had slightly moved or that the room was now thirty centimeters more narrow. But I noticed that the closet’s door wouldn’t open due to the bookshelf having moved forward. I took a closer look and noticed pushpins holding the wallpaper on the ceiling. No matter how good of a job the girl had done, there was bound to be some sloppiness with how pressed of an undertaking that had been. That’s how I learned of the existence of the girl hiding behind that feeble wall.

“However, that’s also where the complications began. I still didn’t know what kind of person was hiding in there by that point, but I just really didn’t want to scream, ‘Found you!’ and peel off that wall. If possible, I wanted for them to take the wall down and come out by themselves. That is why I chose to expose my deduction not in the bathroom where the body was found, not in Ueda Yuuko’s bedroom where the fake will was found, not in Ueda Naoko-san’s bedroom where the culprit was hiding, but in the hallway in front of Ueda Naoko-san’s bedroom.

“I wanted to create a situation where many people would be in the hallway to stop any attempt at escaping, but not right behind the wallpaper. I planned on taking my time waiting for her.

“My only real concern was the knife the girl had in her possession. The wallpaper had been cut in a very clean manner, you see, so it was clear that she was in possession of some kind of sharp object.

“That doesn’t mean I was wary of her attacking us in the hallway.

“I was scared of the culprit silently committing suicide in her hideout after being cornered for murdering someone.

“That is why I talked about the importance of life and all that boring stuff during my explanation. Hah hah, I didn’t seriously think that would prevent a genuine attempt at suicide, but the suspect came out rather quickly, so all was good.

“This is the one great detective feat I mentioned earlier. I believe I have managed to resolve this case in the best way possible. Some people might of course object to that, and I myself can admit that I’ve taken on more danger than necessary. Even so, I had a strong conviction, a sort of intuition, that things would turn out fine. That’s why I have taken up the title of great detective. The name is Daibakushou Curry. I sincerely hope you will see more of me in the future.”

I, Izumi, Azusa, the press corps, and even the newscaster in the studio were at a loss for words. The video on screen cut after a mere, “Of course, uhh...”

“Huh, that Daibakushou Curry-chan is pretty cute. A buzz cut and a school uniform, awesome,” Azusa commented. “That boy’s uniform had a nametag, right? ‘1-A Suzuki,’ so much for hiding his real name,” Izumi laughed.

6

The phone rang. “Yes?” “Ah, Tsutomu-kun? How did it go? Any progress?” “Still no idea.” “...Okay. I see, got it. Alright, thanks, I’ll keep thinking on my own then.” “Wait, hold on. ...You’re Neko, right? Hold on, sorry, I didn’t look at the pictures.” “Eh～. I mean, it’s fine. Thanks anyway.” “Where are you?” “Still at Namerikawa.” “I see, then I’ll head your way and take a look at the crime scene myself.” “Eh, don’t bother, it’s pretty far.” “I don’t mind.” “How will you go there?” “I’ll figure out a way.” “Okay. Be careful. And don’t forget to bring your cell with you.” “Yeah.” “Call me when you get near

Namerikawa." "Got it." I hung up the phone. "Ah, was that Neko-chan?" Izumi asked. "Yeah." "What did she say?" "She's having some trouble on a case. I'll go out and help her." "Right now? Where?" "Namerikawa." "Then wait a minute, I'll take out the car. I'm free right now." "Nah, don't bother. I'll figure something out. I'll take the train." "Don't be shy. I also wanted to breathe some fresh air." "I'm going too~," Azusa said. "I have, like, nothing to do." "See? Then let's go together." "Yaaay. I'll get to see Great Detective Tsutomu's super deduction~." "I'm not a great detective," I said. "Come on, what are you saying Tsutomu, you're a bonafide great detective," Izumi argued. "Daibakushou Curry's cuter, though," Azusa added. "You mean 1-A Suzuki," Izumi joked while Azusa hummed, "He's so cute~." I gave up on vanishing right away.

Our condo was about one hour away from Namerikawa by car. We first went straight east until we reached the ocean, then turned north. Izumi, in the driver's seat, didn't like the ocean in the winter so she wouldn't even glance at it. Azusa, in the front passenger seat, said she preferred the ocean during winter since there were less people than during the summer, and kept looking at the water. She would sometimes say, *Ah~, looking at the ocean under a cloudy winter sky reminds me of my dad who set out one night to fish and never came back~*. I was pretty sure that Azusa's father worked as an HR manager for the prefectural office. I, in the backseat, wasn't looking either at the road or the ocean. I had removed my sunglasses and was staring at the sky from behind Azusa. Light-gray clouds formed a thin layer below a huge, squirming mass of darker clouds. But those were only present right above us and above the horizon, the rest of the sky was dominated by whiter, sort of linear clouds of all sizes traveling at a fast speed in-between the gray and dark layers. The wind was strong. The gale coming from the ocean would sometimes notice our car and throw a punch at it, fully intending on overturning us at the slightest sign of weakness. Way above those three layers was a flat, pure-white cloud adorning the sky like a bruise; it was so static it made it seem like there was no wind at all up there, like the blue sky above us was

a giant sticker that had been rashly removed. The sky in the distance was still blue, but that blue was flat and phony, as though someone had borrowed the sky and replaced it with a counterfeit.

Hearing, “We’re almost at Namerikawa,” I put my sunglasses back on, took out my cellphone, and called Neko. “Hi again.” “Ah, Tsutomu? You arrived?” “In a bit. Can you tell me where to go? We’re currently going north up the coast.” “Then continue that way until you reach Namerikawa Station and—” Neko said but got interrupted by Azusa screaming at the top of her lungs, “WAAAAAH! HOLY! WHAT THE HECK! AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” “W-w-what is it?! What’s happening?! Are you okay?!” Izumi panicked. “What the hell is wrong, Azusa? Want me to stop somewhere?” “Don’t! Ugh, why…” Azusa curled up and hugged her knees on the passenger seat. “What were those screams just now? Are you okay?” Neko asked on the cell, concerned. “What in the world is happening,” I looked at the beach on the coast and understood why Azusa had screamed. “What is wrong?” Neko asked through the cell I was holding against my ear. “An insane amount of fish were pushed ashore on the beach and died,” I said. “Wow. Nobody seems to have noticed yet, but so many fish have died. The beach is crowded with dead fish.” To the extent I had a hard time recognizing it as a beach. A wet carpet about ten-meters-wide made out of black fish spread over multiple kilometers of beach. I’d thought I was looking at a rocky coast. But no. It was a mass of dead fish. Most if not all of the fish close to the shore must’ve been dead. Maybe all the fish in the ocean had died even beyond the expanse we could see here. The bottom of the ocean might be entirely covered with fish corpses. And the lifeless ocean might be calmly rocking above those corpses.

“Someone might have poured poison in the ocean,” Neko said. “Probably. Or maybe a scary monster appeared in the ocean and all the fish escaped from it on the shore, following the example of the people who left the water when the shark appeared in *Jaws*.” But I couldn’t sense any monsters oppressive enough to make fish run away all the way onto the land inside the ocean I was looking at. Far from that, I couldn’t picture anything living down there.

“Godzilla might be coming to Toyama,” Neko said. “Thinking about it, the American Godzilla ate fish,” I said. “Well, for starters, come to the roundabout in front of Namerikawa Station. Call me when you’re there.” “Okay.”

I hung up and noticed that Azusa was crying.

“It’s almost like it’s happening because of my dumb joke,” she said. “Maybe it really is because of what I said about my dad dying while fishing.”

I was about to tell her that wasn’t the case and console her when Izumi said, “Yeah it’s your fault, Azusa. It’s 100% your fault,” in a harsh tone making a grim face, so Azusa went silent.

Izumi was mean because we were so close to the ocean. It wasn’t rare for her to act like that near the coast. She always said there was no real reason every time I’d asked why she hated the ocean so much, but there has to be a special reason for someone to hate something to the extent that they act nasty to other, unrelated people.

Izumi moved to the shoulder, parked there, and said, “Azusa, go to the back.” “Thanks.” Azusa unfastened her seatbelt, looked back, got on her knees, crawled between the driver and passenger seat, and sat next to me. She then clung onto me. I hugged her with one hand and rested the other on Izumi’s shoulder. The car resumed its course. I continued to hug Azusa in silence. Azusa closed her eyes, and Izumi looked ahead at the road and drove. When we finally drove past the beach full of fish corpses, Izumi put her hand where mine was resting.

There had been too much death today.

“Sorry Azusa,” Izumi said. “I didn’t mean that earlier.”

Azusa kept her mouth and eyes closed as she nodded while rubbing against my chest.

We met up with Neko at the roundabout in front of the station. *Wooosh*, a gust of wind barged inside the car right as I opened the door. “So cold, so cold...” Neko mumbled, now in the passenger seat, as she removed her green duffle coat and tossed it towards Azusa and me. “You guys, we’re in public, you’re unbelievable,” she said because Azusa’s hands were inside my pants rubbing and playing with my

thing. It did seem to improve her mood so I was letting her do as she pleased.

"Oh right, Neko, the fish thing, it was so crazy. There were a ton of them on the beach for soooo long," Azusa said, so Izumi added, "We'll take another route on the way back. That sucked." "Yeah. Izumi was super scary too. I don't want to go back there." Neko just commented with a brief, "Huh." Izumi started the car, left the roundabout, and drove through the residential area following Neko's guidance.

I asked, "Say, Neko, do you know about Seiryouin Ryuusui?"

"No clue," she replied. "What's that? You mean the soft drink?"

"Oh, bingo," Izumi butted in. "Seiryouin Ryuusui *is* a play on that."

"Hmm. So a pun."

"Well, Ryuusui World Novels wouldn't exist without puns," Izumi said. "Though Ryuusui's current style of I'm Not Tellin' You A Wor(l)d Anymore is a complete departure from the Charade Well, not just puns."

"...W-What? Tsutomu-kun, did you let Izumi drink? God, don't let her drive under the influence, please."

"Apparently it just happens when she talks about Seiryouin Ryuusui."

"Hey, Neko, you're a great detective, no? Then you really gotta read Seiryouin Ryuusui-chan, it's vital."

"Ugh, no. I hate puns."

"It's the Charade Well, not puns. You know, charades."

"Aren't those basically puns?"

"Hah...you have a point!"

"What a departure. It's still very much about puns, isn't it?"

"Yes and no. That's how it should be. Departing from puns can only be done by returning to puns. This sense of freedom earned by an upset in logic inside an insular situation is what Ryuusui's endetourtainment is about, after all."

"..."

"See, she's not making any sense," I said.

Izumi then added, “No, it’s I’m Not Lettin’ You Make Sense of It!” and laughed.

Alone.

This conversation lasted until we arrived at the combustion scene.

The street went on for about 50 meters before forking. Near that street’s entrance was a circle drawn with white chalk, inside which we could see traces of char, of something that had burned—probably scraps from the victim, Ubamatsu Yoshio. Ten meters in the street going right at the fork was the spot where Nishino Natsumi claimed to have initially witnessed Ubamatsu Yoshio burning. A few officers who were still standing near the circle waved at us when they noticed Neko. Neko greeted them back.

We walked all the way through the street. Neko showed us where Ubamatsu Yoshio caught on fire. I inspected the surroundings, and indeed, it would have been difficult to escape after setting Ubamatsu on fire. The fork on the opposite side was 40 meters away. If we were to trust Nishino’s claim that she had been walking at a set distance of ten meters behind Ubamatsu and assumed that this was not a suicide from him, then these ten meters would make up for the full distance between the fork and the ignition spot. Nishino must have reached the fork immediately after Ubamatsu ignited and witnessed a burning Ubamatsu. If this was a homicide, there are countless reasons for Nishino not to witness the culprit. And these countless reasons are just what I could come up with, there were even more I didn’t know of. Same if this was a suicide. There was too much I didn’t know. I could barely come up with a fraction of the possibilities for an accidental death. I didn’t even know why spontaneous human combustions occurred.

Alright, I thought, *that’s how it should be.*

“Hi, thanks for coming, Nekoneko-san,” a plainclothes officer approached us. “Ah, thanks for keeping watch.” “Are these people your colleagues maybe?” “No, they’re friends.” “Oh, I see. So they are here to visit you. Feel free to take your time. Not like there’s much to do around here.” “Haha, don’t mind us too much.” “Should I bring you some snacks? I wouldn’t want you to be bored.” “Eh, you *have*

snacks?" "..." "Must be nice being an officer, you get snacks and meals paid for you~. You must be having a picnic out there." "Not at all, we're still working. Also we're trying not to drink on our shifts." "I recommend being sneaky when you start eating~. The locals are still expecting a lot from the police." "Right, we'll be careful. But I believe they expect more out of you, Nekoneko-san. I mean, it's rare to have a great detective. Your business card 'Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan' has some punch to it. It also helps people to calm down. Everyone feels more relaxed when they see a great detective is in charge." "You have a point. Everyone has an image of what a great detective should be, yeah. We must resolve the case without fail. It's quite the heavy demand." "I can imagine, it must be tough not being allowed to fail even once." "It really is~. And we have to bear that weight alone, too. I envy the police, at least you have colleagues to help you out." "It's not all roses either, numbers don't do much against a brilliant brain." "But having many people means you have more smart people too, doesn't it? Must be nice, I wish I could borrow these people's wisdom~." "Well, if you're ever in trouble you can always ask us." "Really, can I? Then I'll pay you a visit one of these days. Right, I must get to work now, thanks for all~." "I gotta return to the picnic too. Oh, I'll send you snacks later if you want. No need to hold back, they say eating sweets makes the brain work better too." "Thank you very much~." "See you later then."

Right when the officer was about to leave, *whoooosh*, a gust flew by us, hit the houses around us, and shook all the windows. I understood. I understood everything.

"Alcohol and tobacco really kill people, huh," I said. Izumi, Azusa, and Neko looked at me, which also made the officer also look my way. I walked up to the grid fence and knocked on the window facing the ignition spot. No reaction. "Boy, what are you doing?" the officer asked.

"I just want to ask these people a few questions."

"This house's residents claimed they haven't seen anything."

"They were dead drunk, weren't they?"

"..."

The window I'd knocked on was ajar. There was a bed right behind it with someone sleeping on it. Bottles of alcohol were lying on the floor next to it. Spirytus. What a thing to be drinking. I could also see a box of cigarettes and a lighter on the space behind the frame of the frosted glass window.

"What's the name of the family that lives here?" I asked. Neko answered while the officer's lips remained sealed, "Shimura-san. This is the daughter's bedroom, Chie-san's."

I kept knocking on the window. "Shimura-san, Shimura-san. Excuse me, could you wake up? Shimura-san, Shimura-san."

Hearing no reaction from her, I decided I would open the window myself, but right then, the window was slammed open by a young woman with disheveled brown hair that looked like her head had exploded. "Shaddup! I told ya all I know already! Leave me alone, damnit!" she yelled. Azusa, Izumi, and Neko winced a step back, but I observed the room behind the woman. Bottles of Spirytus, Four Roses, Stolovaya, and orange juice were rolling on the floor next to the bed, all of them spilling their contents on the floor. The heavy smell of alcohol flew out of the window, making me almost choke just by standing behind it.

"Huh, what's your deal? You're not even from the police, are ya? Screw off, kiddo," Shimura Chie said, scratching her disheveled head, then grabbed a cigarette from the window frame, put it in her mouth, and picked up the lighter.

"I wouldn't use this lighter if I were you."

"Leave me alone."

I swiftly extended a hand and stole the lighter from her.

"The fuck are you doing?! Give that back, shithead!"

I threw the lighter onto the street.

"Pick it up!"

The door on the opposite wall of Shimura Chie's bedroom opened. The air circulated better, expelling an even stronger smell of alcohol from the room. A woman, probably the mother, was standing behind the door.

She yelled with twice the animosity of her daughter, "Can't you

fucking hear me when I tell you to shut up! Shut that mouth or I'll break it!"

She noticed me at the window.

"The fuck, you alcoholic bitch! Don't invite men by the window, slut! Huh, and that's a kid too! The fuck are you gonna do to him, you dumb sex addict!"

She was really imposing. But the daughter fought back.

"You're the alcoholic sex addict here, old wench! Shut up already, get out!"

"*YOU* get out of this house, bitch! You're a fucking plague! Stop pestering us and die! Drop dead!"

"You fucking die! Kick the bucket already!"

The daughter picked up a bottle I couldn't see from behind the bed and threw it at her mother. The mother closed the door, which the bottle hit before falling to the ground. The Whyte & Mackay 12-Year-Old poured onto the carpet.

The mother opened the door again, this time holding a man's leather belt in her hand.

"Get ready to die!"

The mother approached the bed, ready to beat her daughter, so I used my last resort and removed my sunglasses.

"Stop it!"

Both the mother and the daughter looked at me, standing behind the window."

"Huuh...?" The mother said before going down along with her daughter. The wrinkles between their eyebrows were etched too deeply in their faces to disappear, but even so, they were both wearing a gentle smile.

I put my sunglasses back on and turned back to Azusa, Izumi, and Neko.

"I will now resolve this case."

I jumped over the fence, climbed the window, ignored the officer screaming "Hey, hey, stop that!" entered the room, and stood on Shimura Chie's dirty bed. I walked past the immobile two and opened the bedroom's door. The hallway continued straight ahead, with a big

window at the end, which was open. This house must always smell of alcohol with two alcoholics living here, so they had to ventilate it constantly.

"Hey, boy, get out of there!" the officer said from behind the window. "You can't just enter people's houses like that!"

I waited. It soon came.

Wooooosh.

The gust of wind came in from the window in the back, blasted through the hallway, making me shake, and flew out of the daughter's bedroom right in the officer's face.

"Woooah!" he yelped and fell on his back onto the street. "Are you okay~?" Neko asked him. I closed the door.

I said, "I am currently standing inside an accidental flamethrower."

I finally took off my shoes and placed them on the window frame. I once again ignored the officer saying, "Just come out of there now," woke up Shimura Chie and her mother by shaking their shoulders, and started the explanation before they could fully shake off the dizziness.

"This room is filled with...wow, over 40 bottles of alcohol. And it looks like you've been having trouble finishing at least ten of these and instead let them roll on the ground. As you can see here, here, and here, there are stains of alcohol all over the carpet. As you probably know, alcohol is extremely volatile. With this much alcohol turning into gas, it doesn't take long to fill a room as small as this one. Chie-san, do you ventilate this room?"

The daughter didn't respond. I wasn't sure if she was even listening.

"Chie-san, do you leave the window or the door open from time to time?"

She shook her head.

"Nah. It's cold."

"Which means that most of this cramped room's air gets replaced

with alcohol. Azusa would probably get drunk just standing here.

"Now, we have a room full of alcohol, and today at noon, all sorts of stars aligned. Neko, when did the case happen today?"

"Around 11:25 AM."

"Chie-san, do you remember what you were doing at 11:25 this morning?"

She closed her eyes, her mouth still vacantly open, and almost seemed to be sleeping, but my voice seemed to reach her as she gave me an answer, "I was sleeping and woke up."

"Okay. Good job on remembering. I assume you don't remember the specific time, but rather that the case happened soon after, don't you?"

She nodded.

"What woke you up? An alarm clock?"

"...The wench woke me up. Saying I should go to school or something."

"And did you get up?"

"Yeah. I told her to shut up, ahahah."

"And what did you do after that?"

"..."

"Didn't you," I said, grabbing the box of Marlboro Light from the window frame, "try to smoke one of these cigarettes?"

"Ah, right, yeah. My morning smoke. But the wench opened the door so I told her it was damn cold, but she came in, told me to shut up, and fucking opened this window too. I told her to get out and she told me to go to hell, what a bitch."

"...You're the bitch, moron," the mother butted in.

The daughter replied "Drop dead," so I told them, "Chie-san, madam, don't make me remove my sunglasses."

The daughter put on a smile and said, "Remove those, kiddo. You're beautiful, know that?"

"...What did you do after your mother opened the window, Chie-san?"

"Closed it. I said, 'It's fucking cold!' and slammed it shut."

"With your left hand, right?"

"...Yeah. How do you know that?"

"You were holding the lighter with your right hand, weren't you?"

"Yeah. To light my cigarette."

"But it didn't catch on. Look, it's still there," I pointed at the bed. There was a Marlboro Light by Shimura Chie's feet.

"Oh, lucky," she said and leaned to grab it, so I stopped her.

"Please leave it where it is. So, when you closed the window, Chie-san, was this room's door open or closed?

"Open. It was so cold. It's fucking cold in this house, wench!"

"Die."

"Come on, don't make me remove my sunglasses. Geez. Chie-san, take your time remembering and tell me, did you remember feeling anything when your mother opened the window?"

"..."

I waited. It came yet again.

Whoooosh!

The old Shimura house shook.

"...Ah, right."

Right.

"It was so damn cold, but then wind came blowing from the door the wench had left open."

Exactly.

"Thank you, Chie-san."

"Can you remove those glasses, pretty please?"

"We now have confirmation that all the required coincidences were aligned. I will name them in order: This room was full of volatile alcohol. This morning, at around 11:25, Chie-san's mother woke her daughter up. Chie-san indeed woke up and tried to light a cigarette. The mother entered the room and opened the window. Both the door and the window were open, and a gust of wind hit the room right as she was about to use the lighter.

"In a way, that gust of wind saved Chie-san and her mother's lives. If it weren't for it, this alcohol-filled room would have ignited and started a fire.

"However, although their lives were spared, Ubamatsu Yoshio,

who was innocently passing in front of the window by chance, lost his.

“The wind expelled all the alcohol from the room outside, which, ignited by the lighter, burned Ubamatsu-san behind the window. Chie-san, both drunk and just waking up at the time, slammed the window shut without noticing Ubamatsu-san’s combustion outside. Her mother, too, was too busy yelling at Chie-san to notice Ubumatsu-san walking by the window, the huge flame being expelled out, or Ubumatsu-san being instantly enveloped in flames. The alcohol only immolated Ubumatsu-san, the rest burning away and disappearing in the air.

“That is what happened this morning, at 11:25.”

I then addressed the Shimura mother and daughter, who didn’t seem to comprehend the situation.

“I greatly recommend putting a stop to drinking and smoking, but more than anything, you should stop insulting each other. You are unable to pay attention to your surroundings when you yell at the other to shut up. As seen here, you don’t even notice a man burning in flames right outside of your window at your worst. I’m not telling you to become good friends, but please stop screaming at each other. That alone should let you pay more attention to various things and have you notice and think of much more.”

After this needless lecture, I put my shoes back on and left by the window. Azusa, Izumi, and Neko started clapping when I landed.

“Saw that? Hey, you saw that? You saw my little great detective?” Neko was frolicking, so I told her, “Stop that, Neko. I could tell you the same thing. You lose sight of many things when you are quarreling with others. Refrain from meaningless disputes. One should only argue when it helps someone grow.”

Neko said, “Roger!” and pretended to be dejected.

She overacted so much I let out a laugh.

“Let’s go home now.”

I was about to head back when the officer called out to me.

“Boy, please, your name.”

I saw someone holding a camera behind the officer.

“I don’t have a name. I am nobody.”

I shook off the officer and returned to the car we’d used to come here.

We avoided the dead fish on our way back and took a route far from the coast.

“Thanks for the help, Tsutomu-kun,” Neko said.

She and Azusa were clinging to me on both sides.

“I haven’t done much,” I said.

“I would *never* have noticed myself. So much for calling myself the Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan... Let me become your assistant, Tsutomu-kun. Please.”

“I’m not a great detective.”

Nor was I the God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku.

“I was lucky and came across something that looked like the right answer, but if I hadn’t, I fully intended on making up a random ‘truth.’”

“A random truth, like what?”

“Look,” I said, taking out a stone from my pocket. A small, light stone. Entirely black, shaped a bit weirdly with bumps everywhere. I had picked it up in front of the Shimura house’s window.

“A stone?”

“No, this is a meteorite. Dozens, sometimes hundreds of meteorites fall on Earth every single day. But most of them entirely burn up at a high temperature due to the friction with the atmosphere, so they rarely reach the ground. This is one of the few that made it all the way through. It fell in front of that window while burning red, grazed Ubamatsu-san who was walking by, and crashed against the Earth. *Poc*, very lightly. And when this tiny meteorite fell, ripping apart the air in its path, the enormous, vivid flame that enveloped it ignited Ubamatsu-san and burned him.”

“...”

“Doesn’t that take you aback?”

“It does.”

“Is it fitting for a great detective to say?”

“Maybe.”

“But you see, I just made it up.”

“Ehh!? What, that was a lie just now?” Azusa asked. “It sent chills down my spine. For a second I even considered stealing that stone and selling it off to NASA, gee!”

Izumi, Neko, and I laughed.

The car rocked and Izumi said, “Come on, Azusa, don’t make me laugh when I’m at the wheel.”

“Tsutomu, I really think you’re made to be a great detective,” Neko said. “I mean, you might have resolved that case even with that lie. Also, you managed to resolve it without having to make up a random lie in the end, and I really think that was the best thing you could have done. At least it was better than concluding it with a lie.”

But I didn’t want to become a great detective. I didn’t want to become famous and let Tsutomu and Suzuki-kun find me. I didn’t have a name to become famous.

Using ‘Tsutomu’ was getting pretty painful too.

I needed to leave this place in the near future.

7

Three days later, Azusa, Izumi, and Neko’s pregnancies were confirmed at once.

They consulted each other and decided to pass a pregnancy test at the same time.

They were all ecstatic and quickly started thinking of names. An exam at the hospital confirmed they were all boys, so Azusa, Izumi, and Neko had me choose the names.

I named them Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.

They slowly grew and, when Azusa, Izumi, and Neko’s stomachs were ripe enough, I sliced them open one by one with my katana and took out Tolerant from Azusa, Sincere from Izumi, and Honest from Neko.

Sasaki Azusa was 21, Hayashi Izumi 23, and Hirose Neko 19, so they naturally had one or two ex-boyfriends each. I knew all of them, so I killed each of their first men and offered the corpses to them.

Yamamoto Kenichirou to Azusa, Watanabe Atsuhiro to Izumi, and Morikawa Yoshiyuki to Neko. I sliced their chests open, took one rib from each, and put them inside Azusa, Izumi, and Neko's open stomachs before sewing them shut with a needle and a string.

I took the pachira from the building's lobby up to the apartment and placed it in the middle of the living room so that the three cuddling couples were surrounding it. I piled up Seiryouin Ryuusui's *Cosmic*, *Joker*, *Carnival Eve*, *Carnival*, and *Carnival Day* I'd bought online near the base of the pachira.

That was the Tree of Wisdom. The Garden of Eden was now complete.

Farewell, my three Adams and Eves.

I packed my bag with the Castle of Illusions file, the katana, and Seiryouin Ryuusui's *Episode One*, then left the building with the three babies in my arms.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest—you three are me.

I still didn't know where I would go next.

Episode 3
9+9+9
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

"Hey."

"Mm?"

"Come. I'm upstairs."

"What happened?"

"Just come. We have to talk."

I looked at Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest's baby beds, confirmed they were all sleeping like upside-down frogs, replied, "Got it," put down the phone, left the room, and climbed the stairs. The top of the stairs was shrouded with the warm and pungent aura of repressed anger I had deciphered in Emiko's voice.

She was angry about something. I didn't know what that something was.

I entered the Japanese-style room on the second floor. Emiko wasn't there. There was just our Cairn Terrier, Moppy, lying on the floor. Moppy noticed me, raised its head, and inquired whether I was going to play with it. I chopped the air in its direction. *Nay nay, Moppy.* It tilted its head before quickly ceasing to care and putting its face back on the tatami mat.

Emiko was seated at the dining table, waiting for me. I moved to the dining room and looked at Emiko, but she was looking down. Her gaze was directed at the table, at Seiryouin Ryuusui's Kodansha Novels-print *Cosmic*, *Joker*, *Carnival Eve*, *Carnival*, *Carnival Day*, *The Saimon Family Case*, and two envelopes next to them, each holding a huge stack of papers visible through the opening. One of them had been hidden inside my bag so it was ripped here and there and not in its best state, but the other one was brand new. The new one had this house's address written on it.

Aichi Prefecture, Toyama City, Nakahata, 35-41.

It was addressed to:

Satou Emiko-sama, and
Tsutomu-sama

The sender's name wasn't written on the envelope.

"Take a seat."

I abided and sat at the table, facing Emiko and looking into her eyes. She was resting her elbows on the table, her hands covering her mouth with her two index fingers touching her lips.

She was searching for the right words and rearranging them inside her head.

"You know," she said, "first and foremost, I want to tell you this, Tsutomu. I genuinely love you."

"Yeah." I knew.

"That's why I won't tolerate lies. I don't want you to lie to me. Tsutomu, are you lying?"

"That question is pretty much meaningless, but I'm not lying," I answered. I might not have disclosed the entire truth, but I hadn't lied to her. Nobody can convey absolutely everything about a subject.

"I will trust these words, so please answer me. Will you?"

"Sure."

"Tsutomu, do you know a girl named Azusa?"

"I don't."

"Do you know Izumi?"

"I don't."

"Do you know Neko?"

"I don't."

"She's a great detective. The last one, Neko. The Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan."

"I have never heard of such a great detective." The only great detective I knew of was my little brother, Tsutomu. He called himself the Great Detective Daibakushou Curry. And I called myself Tsutomu. My true identity lacked a family name, it was just Tsukumojuuku. And the name Tsukumo Juuku was used by the author Seiryouin Ryuusui's God of Detectives inside his mystery novels. That meta detective

whose overwhelming beauty makes people faint is a sort of clone of mine and is fated to be murdered on the last day of the 20th century. The last day of the 20th century had already passed. I was still alive.

"Seiryouin Ryuusui sent this, didn't he?" I said, looking at the envelope lying on the table and the manuscript inside. That must be *Episode Two*. "I didn't write it," I said.

"Did you write this, Tsutomu?" Emiko ignored my foresight and asked anyway for confirmation.

"I didn't. I am not Seiryouin Ryuusui."

"These books have pictures of Seiryouin Ryuusui. I can tell that he's not you," Emiko said. "But what in the world does this mean?"

The new manuscript indicated it had been sealed on the 31st of January. We were close to the end of February, so it had been almost a full month. Emiko had spent that month digging through my belongings to find *Episode One*, reading Seiryouin Ryuusui's novels, thinking on her own, and investigating various things.

As she had requested, I answered Emiko with full honesty. "I don't know."

"Don't tell me you don't know. Think seriously."

"Thinking won't get me an answer. I simply do not know. If I did I could give you an answer, but I don't. I really don't."

"If you give up on anything you don't already know you will never learn. Think more."

Arguing here would be meaningless. "May I read the new manuscript?"

"No. Answer my questions first."

"Sure."

"Be honest, okay?"

"Yes, I'll answer honestly. I have never told you a lie, Emiko."

She ignored my comment and started asking questions.

"Do you really not know these Azusa, Izumi, Neko, and Nekoneko Nyannyannyan?"

"I don't. You've already asked about that."

"Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest are *my* children, right? Tsutomu, you haven't switched them with strangers' children at the hospital,

have you?”

She was reading too far into it. “They are your children. Not a stranger’s.”

“They are also your children, right?”

“They are. They are my precious triplets.”

“Tsutomu, have you been in touch with Serika-san?”

“I haven’t.”

“Really?”

“Really. I keep telling you I’m being honest.”

“What about Seshiru?”

“I haven’t been in contact with Seshiru either.”

“Do you have any other lovers?”

“I don’t.”

“Did you used to?”

“I never had anyone else.”

“Do you love me?”

“I do. I always tell you as much, don’t I?”

“Do you love someone else?”

“Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Tsutomu. Suzuki-kun. Katou-kun. Takashi-san. Junko-san. Heisuke-san. Shiono-san. Seshiru and Serika. Also Moppy.”

“Do you want to have sex with Seshiru-san and Serika-san again?”

“I do not. I have you now.”

“What if I disappear?”

“Then I would search for you.”

“What if I die?”

“I would grieve for you.”

“And once you are done grieving?”

“I would start anew. Along with Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.”

“Would you fall in love with someone else?”

“That is a possibility. But I would always love you and keep you in my heart.”

“You wouldn’t be able to love me forever if I died, would you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be able to write love letters or kiss you, yeah. But there are other, more subdued ways of loving someone, so I would

probably do that. Let's stop thinking about what would happen if you were to die, okay? Last time we talked about that topic you freaked out and cried, don't you remember?"

"I'm fine, I won't cry. It's important to go over this."

"Okay. That's fair. I just wish you wouldn't doubt the feelings I have for you or for Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest."

"Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt anywhere." Being put into question cannot hurt someone.

"Not even your heart?"

Yet again the 'heart.' "My heart isn't hurt either. The heart is basically a machine that creates love. I've already told you before, but the heart only gets upset when it realizes that it was wrong or amiss. It doesn't get upset as long as it is right and in the right place."

"Right, because you're smart."

"Being smart has nothing to do with it. I am merely doing a good job of dividing what I know from what I don't know. Other people are convinced they know things they in fact don't, and that's what results in them being wrong or amiss."

"But people have expectations or, like, develop a personal image of how something should be."

"That uncertainty is what leads to errors and misunderstandings which upset the heart and, in other words, hurt it. The expression of the heart getting hurt is actually quite inaccurate since the cause of that injury is always oneself for being wrong or amiss; phrasing it like someone else is attacking the heart is quite wrong. Let's put an end to this topic as well. We are just repeating ourselves at this point. Also, you will either blame me or yourself if we continue on this trajectory. The fact that my heart doesn't get upset but yours does just means we are different, not that I am somehow superior to you. My heart isn't 'cold' or defective in any way either, okay?"

"I know. I've come to terms with that already. I just want to know whether you would really be sad if you lost me."

"I would. My heart houses a strong love for you, Emiko, of course it would be sad if I were to lose you."

“Do you resent getting sad? Do you wish I wasn’t in your life so you could not grieve for me?”

“You are presently here, and hypothesizing about that not being the case would be the same as losing you, so I would be sad either way.”

“But if we had never met from the start and you had never known about me?”

“That question is meaningless too. Let’s talk about probabilities. I don’t think we’ve had this conversation yet.

“You see, all events in this world can be categorized into things that have happened, things that won’t happen, and things that are to happen. Of course, each category does *not* have a 33.333...% chance of happening; things that have happened have a 100% chance of happening. Things that won’t happen and things that are to happen happen 0% of the time. In other words, things that *have* happened had a 100% chance of happening.”

Then, Emiko finally looked at my face and said, “Do you think I’m stupid? Why are you stating the obvious? Are you trying to dodge the problem?”

“I am not,” I said. “When you roll a dice, you don’t know if you will get a one, a two, a three, a four, a five, or a six. You don’t even know what other possibilities than these six ones there might be. Once something you don’t know gets involved, that’s a dead end.”

“Not necessarily.”

“It’s not even worth considering as a possibility.”

“It is.”

“You only believe that it is. That kind of belief leads to erring and ‘getting hurt.’”

“There must have been a possibility of us never meeting. There must have been all sorts of scenarios.”

“There wasn’t. You and I met. That happened. What happens does so with 100% certainty, anything else that doesn’t happen or is to happen simply cannot occur. Things that cannot occur aren’t possibilities. They are mere words which don’t hold any meaning whatsoever.”

“Come on... Why do you have to be so arrogant...” Emiko rubbed her eyes. She started to cry despite her claim she wouldn’t. Emiko had been wrong once again. She had been amiss. But that’s fine. Humans have the right to err or to be mistaken. They have the right to upset their hearts. They have the right to ‘hurt’ themselves.

Even so, I didn’t want Emiko’s heart to stay upset for long.

“I’m not arrogant,” I said. “There are many things I don’t know about. I have never even helped anyone. And, most of all, I have made you cry.”

“I’m just crying on my own. You didn’t make me.”

“You crying is an observable fact, and my words lead you to that state. Though it wasn’t on purpose.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine with crying.”

“What I wanted to say was that you and I met because we were meant to, and it could have never gone down otherwise.”

“Please, enough with that. Leave me alone for a moment. Read this,” she said, pushing the new envelope over to me. I picked it up and took out the stack of paper from inside.

Episode Two - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Two months after *Episode One*.

“Give it a read while I’m crying,” Emiko said.

I began reading it. It was shorter than *Episode One*. I was a fast reader so I might be done with it before Emiko stopped crying.

2

In the period depicted in *Episode Two*—which is to say the period between my escape from Fukui Prefecture and the birth of Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest—I wasn’t in the Toyama Prefecture but in Toyama City in Aichi Prefecture. I’d spent these two years living here with Satou Emiko. I didn’t know of an ‘Azusa,’ ‘Izumi,’ or ‘Neko,’ and certainly not a ‘Nekoneko Nyannyannyan.’ I’d spent that whole period solely having sex with Emiko, which resulted in the triplets Tolerant,

Sincere, and Honest. I'd never heard the names of Yamamoto Kenichirou, Watanabe Atsuhiro, or Morikawa Yoshiyuki which came up in '7' either. I almost never left the house so I didn't have anyone I could call a friend. I barely had a few acquaintances.

But someone was clearly watching me, I thought. My impressions overlapped with what I'd thought inside *Episode Two* when reading *Episode One*: Someone with a grasp on my actions had written *Episode One* and *Episode Two*. And that person using the name 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' was either Seshiru, Serika, or one of their acquaintances. But I didn't know their current whereabouts.

"What do you think?" Emiko asked. "Any comments after reading it?"

"You were shocked by what is written in chapter seven, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"But I haven't killed anyone named 'Izumi,' 'Azusa,' or 'Neko.' I shouldn't even need to say this."

"But you killed a few people in *Episode One* already, haven't you? Reading this, it seems like...you killed the mother of the family you used to live with. And aren't you also the one who killed the Kobayashi family to cover for Seshiru-san and Serika-san?"

"This is fiction. The Kobayashi family is still alive and well to this day."

"But it's written that you've killed them. Both in *Episode One* and *Episode Two*."

"Many people write all sorts of things. We don't have to listen to every one of them."

"What about 'Izumi'-san, 'Azusa'-san, and 'Neko'-san? What about the 'Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan'?"

"I don't know these people."

"Then who could have killed these girls..."

Emiko stood up, headed to the living room, picked up today's newspaper from the magazine rack next to the sofa set, and came back.

I looked at it. The headline caught my attention first.

Serial Murders in the Castle of Illusions, Already 27 Dead

The Castle of Illusions. So it actually existed? There was a brief explanation about the castle in a corner of the article which stated that it was located in Chofu, Tokyo. ‘Castle of Illusions’ was just a nickname, it was actually a private residence owned by self-proclaimed artist Yanbe Tetsuo. There was an anecdote about the origin of the appellation: The building took two years of construction work to be erected near the Chofu Airport, but the locals had no memories of the construction period; they all perceived it like one day, suddenly, the giant, old-European-castle-looking residence of approximately 33 thousand square meters suddenly manifested there. The locals then started calling it the Castle of Illusions due to their shock. It quickly became famous as one of the area’s mysteries. There are many theories about it, like that it was a case of mass hysteria, that Yanbe manipulated their memories with drugs because he was scared of his building permit getting denied for damaging the tourism industry, or even that Yanbe was an extraterrestrial lifeform.

There was no concrete information about Yanbe Testuo’s artistic activities during the war.

Here is the gist of the case:

Yanbe Tetsuo, who had continued pursuing his mysterious artistic goals inside the Castle of Illusions, convened people to a party where he would expose his oeuvre for the first time on the first of February. However, on the fateful day, an anomaly occurred to the castle. All the doors and windows leading outside the building were locked and steel shutters blocked access to them, closing the castle shut from the outside world. The Yanbe family, their employees, and the party attendants—making for a total of 113 people—were locked inside. Amidst that confusion, Yanbe Tetsuo’s murdered corpse was

discovered. Despite 23 days having gone past since the day of the party, the castle was still locked, leaving the attendees' cellphones as the only way of communicating with the inside. The Tokyo police, assisted by riot squads, were desperately trying to conduct rescue missions, but the castle's solid structure was slowing them down; they had yet to even enter the castle. In the meantime, the serial killing was still progressing, one, two, maybe four, five, or even thirteen people at a time.

The Castle of Illusions is where the second installment of Seiryouin Ryuusui's JDC Series, *Joker*, takes place. 'A castle reminiscent of Nymphenburg' 'located in the city of Kyoto.' In there, a serial killer who calls themselves The Artist 'aims to combine all previous mystery novels and elevate them to a new form' as they 'recreate all kinds of mystery novel elements.'

The JDC (= Japan Detective Club) appears a bit in *Episode One* as well. When 'I' made up the mitate of the first seven days which are depicted at the start of *Genesis*, I sent a message to the Japan Detective Club's homepage. That Japan Detective Club had an 'Expert Concentration Great Detective' and 'phone detective,' the 'super handsome' Ajiro Souji. In the Kodansha Novels edition of the JDC, Ajiro Souji is 'the founder of the JDC' and its 'chief commander.'

The two fictional tales which are Seiryouin Ryuusui's Kodansha Novels-published JDC Series and the *Episode One* and *Episode Two* sent to me by 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' intersect with my actual reality in complex ways. There might be other intersecting elements I had yet to notice, and that blending process might not necessarily be over yet. That person claiming to be 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' might currently be observing me and about to send *Episode Three*.

I still couldn't know for the moment.

My eyes then moved onto the next article. Likewise, it started with a big headline.

Nagoya's Serial Decapitation Case Sees A Third

Victim

I didn't read newspapers, watch TV, nor use the internet, so I had no clue people were being killed in the Castle of Illusions or that this case, which took place in the very prefecture I was in, existed. Nor did I know the names of the three decapitated victims.

The name of the woman who was working in an accounting firm in Nagoya before being killed and decapitated while on her way home on New Year's Eve was Hayashi Izumi (23 years old).

Later in the same year, on the night of January 14th, a university student in Nagoya was killed and decapitated in the emergency staircase of the building she lived in. Her name was Sasaki Azusa (21 years old).

And last night, on the 23rd of February, Hirose Neko (19 years old), who worked at a detective agency in Nagoya, was found decapitated in her backyard.

'Izumi,' 'Azusa,' and 'Neko.'

The three women 'I' had made to give birth to my children before slicing their bellies open and killing them in *Episode Two*.

It's no wonder Emiko was baffled at this article when she had already read *Episode One* and *Episode Two*. It matched too perfectly.

I raised my eyes from the articles.

"Tsutomu, you haven't killed these girls, have you?" Emiko asked once more.

I could see confusion in her eyes. She must have been doubting me ever since receiving *Episode Two* on the first of February, or even before if she had found *Episode One* previous to that. She must have been at a loss. Emiko was exhausted. That exhaustion caused her to doubt things that didn't need to be put into question.

"We slept together last night, didn't we? When Tolerant and Sincere started crying during the night we woke up together. I was there with you and we both returned to the bed, didn't we? The same goes for New Year's Eve and the 14th of January, I was sleeping with

you in this house's bed and never went outside. Haven't I always been taking care of Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest?"

"You were but...still, Tsutomu, you're smart, you could probably think of a way to slip away from me, couldn't you?"

"I'm not sure. But I assure you I have not done any such thing."

"Be sure to say that to the police too."

The police would come here? "Did you talk to the police about me?"

"No, it's just that I had Hirose-san, yesterday's victim, look into you. So maybe the police will come here and ask us questions, that's all."

Detective agency employee in Nagoya, Hirose Neko (19 years old).

Of course the police would come. But when they did and I explained to them how the contents of Seiryouin Ryuusui's *Episode One*, *Episode Two*, and JDC Series intersect with reality, would they be able to tell me what these intersections mean?

"Did you share *Episode One* and *Episode Two* with Hirose-san?"

Emiko nodded.

"You copied them?"

"Yes. Hirose-san has the only copy."

"How much of my life had she dug up?"

Emiko wasn't sure what to say for a second. She then answered, "Until Kyoto."

So she knew basically everything I had done.

"I met with Suzuki Miwako-san as well."

"Oh, so that's what that 'hot spring trip' was."

"Yeah. But the visit time was too short to talk much."

"You shouldn't have. She might use you as a hint to find my whereabouts."

"Don't worry, I lied here and there. I said I was writing a book about child abuse."

"..."

“Don’t you want to know how Suzuki-san is doing?”

“Not really.”

“She called you by the names Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Tsutomu, why did you name our children that way? They are my children, why would you give them these names?”

“Because I didn’t know any other names.”

“Idiot.”

“I swear.”

“I know you’re telling the truth. That’s why I called you an idiot.”

“I just couldn’t think of anything other than Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have given birth to triplets…”

“Don’t say stuff like that.”

“Shut up. I can say whatever I want. It was a mistake to give birth to triplets…with you at least.”

“Emiko, stop it.”

“Shut up, damn Tsukumojuuku!”

“…”

“What is that? Tsukumojuuku!? It’s not even a real number!”

She had a point.

“Tell me. What is it? I’m asking you. I’m asking you right now. Why Tsukumojuuku, tell me.”

“Heisuke-san said it was the name of a god.”

“Huh? You mean the God of Detectives? Hey, are you actually living inside a novel? Seriously, tell me. Stop acting like a joke. Here we’re in the real world, we have to pay taxes, the insurance, the water bill, the gas bill, and a ton of money for these triplets, you get that? And yet the father is named Tsukumojuuku, a so-called God of Detectives, and that weird Seiryouin Ryuusui guy keeps sending us these weird novels and pulling us to that weird world, I can’t deal with that!”

“That’s why I use the name Tsutomu. I pay my taxes, the insurance fee, and the gas and water bills.”

“How does that change anything?! Your real name is still Tsukumojuuku! So dumb. It makes no damn sense!”

“I can’t do much about my name.”

“I’m criticizing the names you gave!”

“I didn’t choose Tsukumojuuku myself.”

“Not that one. Why would you name them Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest?!”

I had already answered that, I thought and remained silent.

“Fuck, why am I losing my mind telling that to a 15-year-old brat… What am I doing with my life,” she said before going silent and starting to cry again.

“Emiko,” I said, “tell me what you want me to do. Do you want me to leave the house?”

Emiko shook her head. She then asked, “What? Will you fucking leave me if I say that?”

“Of course not,” I said. “I won’t leave. I love you, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Then do you want to change our children’s names? We could still send a form to the government—”

“No. That’s not it. I just want to be sure,” Emiko picked up *Episode One* and *Episode Two* from the table and threw them onto the ground. *Fpah!* The manuscripts scattered all over the floor. “I want a clear line that separates these stupid novels from the reality we live in! Stop making what is real and what is fake all ambiguous!” She then grabbed the newspaper and threw it to the floor. “This too! It should be a lie and yet it actually happened, fuck that! Do that elsewhere, seriously! I don’t want any of that inside our lives!” Emiko swept her arm across the table and pushed all six Seiryouin Ryuusui novels off of it. “I don’t want these stupid and weird novels to step inside my life. Fuck them! Aaah! He should just die, that Seiryouin Ryuusui guy. I really want him dead. Say, Tsutomu, you’re smart, can’t you do it? Can you find this Seiryouin Ryuusui guy and kill him? Please. Can you also draw the line between reality and all these lies? Can you make it clear what is real and what is fictional? Please. You can do it, Tsutomu, right?”

I didn’t know. But I knew it was time for me to do something. I knew I couldn’t afford to say I didn’t know.

“Okay,” I said. “I will make it clear what is real and what is not. I

will also capture this ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ and put him through hell. But what about the ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ of Kodansha Novels? What if he has nothing to do with *Episode One* and *Episode Two*?”

“I don’t care. You can leave him alone if he’s really unrelated to that. The only one I want dead is the ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ that keeps sending us these stupid novels. Find and kill him.”

“Okay.”

“Tsutomu, come over here.”

I stood up, walked around the table, stepped over ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels, and stopped before Emiko. Still seated on her chair, she put her arms around my back and cried. Silently, breathing calmly, only shedding tears.

“I’m sorry, Tsutomu. I know I shouldn’t blame you. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing,” I said. “I really shouldn’t have given our children my ancient names.”

“It’s fine. They are good names. Also, I doubt I could come up with any other good names now.”

That’s how names work. Once one settles in, it remains there forever.

That’s why, despite using ‘Tsutomu,’ I remained Tsukumojuuku. If Suzuki-kun and Katou-kun had settled on just one of the names ‘Tolerant,’ ‘Sincere,’ ‘Honest,’ or ‘Tolerant Sincere Honest,’ I would not have been ‘Tsukumojuuku,’ and I would not have named our children ‘Tolerant,’ ‘Sincere,’ and ‘Honest.’ But what has happened was meant to happen, and since it had already happened these hypotheses were but hopeless words.

I was Tsukumojuuku.

“Tsutomu,” Emiko said, letting go of me. “Take your sunglasses off.”

“...But you will faint if our eyes meet.”

“It’ll be fine.”

It had never once been fine. Emiko had always fainted upon seeing my face without sunglasses. Everyone fainted at my beauty.

“Come on, just do it.”

I took my sunglasses off.

Emiko jumped forward and plunged her fingers inside my eye sockets. She took my eyeballs out. It hurt.

“Does it hurt?”

“Of course.”

“Suzuki-san gouged them out, right?” Emiko rolled my eyeballs on top of her palms.

“Tsutomu, can you see?”

“I can.”

I could see Emiko’s satisfied face.

“I feel for you, Tsutomu.”

Emiko then returned my eyeballs to their sockets, looked at my face, started to lose consciousness at the hand of my beautiful gaze, nearly fell backwards from her chair, which I prevented from happening, and then completely fainted inside my arms after putting on an ecstatic smile.

I carried her to our bedroom in the basement where Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were sleeping. The three of them were sleeping inside their baby beds. I put Emiko to sleep in our bed next to them, and tucked her in.

I put on my duffle coat, went up to the first floor, put my glasses back on, put my shoes on, and headed out.

I would grant Emiko’s wish.

3

First, I connected the computer to the internet and searched for the terms ‘JDC’ and ‘Japan Detective Club,’ but all the results were about the Kodansha Novels Seiryouin Ryuusui’s JDC; the Japan Detective Club depicted in *Episode One* with the ‘super handsome’ Ajiro Souji appeared not to exist.

I found Daily Investigation’s reports inside Emiko’s work bag. There were seven of them, one every two days starting on February eighth. From a quick look, the first three were entirely dedicated to minute observations of my daily life while the next four dug up my past. The reporter even went to my ancient house in West Akatsuki,

Fukui, and confirmed the existence of Katou-kun, Takashi-san, Heisuke-san, Shiono-san, as well as Seshiru and Serika's belly slicings of Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko, and that they had been 'rebirthed' from them before killing Junko-san and escaping/vanishing as depicted in *Episode One* and *Episode Two*. The only aspect of Junko-san's murder that didn't match with *Episode Two* was that her decapitated head had yet to be found. Needless to say, 'Ueda Yuuko-san's murder case at the hand of a certain girl' never happened. Tsutomu wasn't a great detective, and he didn't use the name Daibakushou Curry. He still attended West Akatsuki High School as Suzuki Tsutomu.

The last report was a recording of Emiko's meeting with Suzuki-kun. However, Suzuki-kun wasn't in the right mind to speak, she merely repeated, "Bring me Tolerant and Sincere and Honest." She was administered tranquilizers but started agitating so the guards cut the meeting short.

Suzuki-kun.

I shook my head and thought about the immediate future. I had to act. I called Kodansha's Third Literary Publishing Department in Tokyo. "Hello, this is the Kodansha Third Literary Department," a woman answered. "Ah, excuse me, my name is Satou..." "Oh, thank you as always." Always? "Would Oota Katsushi-san happen to be present today?" "Ah, I'm sorry. Oota is still not in a state to be coming to work. Please wait a moment." Not in a state to be coming to work...but 'Oota Katsushi' was alive. The interlocutor soon changed to a man. "Yeah, hello? Karaki speaking, always good to hear from you. Where are you now, Satou-san? Are you lost again or what? Hah hah hah." He was mistaking me for someone else. I knew who that someone was. The author Satou Yuuya. He had published *Flicker Style*, *Enamel-Varnished Soul's Gravity*, *Submerged Piano*, and *Christmas Terror* from Kodansha Novels. Satou Yuuya's editor was Oota Katsushi, and this man, Karaki, was the Kodansha Third Literary Publishing Department's editor-in-chief. My plan had been to get a hold of and meet Oota so I could explain the situation to him and have him set up a meeting with Seiryouin Ryuusui, but now that had changed. "Sorry,

I know I shouldn't be laughing. Well, the best we can do is keep up a bright mood and do our best until Oota comes back," Karaki said. "Hello," I spoke. Since we had been mistaken, my and Satou Yuuya's voices must be somewhat similar. "Sorry to be so sudden, I would like to contact Seiryouin Ryuusui-san..." "Eh? What happened?" I spout out a random lie, "I must talk with Seiryouin-san regarding a task Oota-san had entrusted me with." "Huh? What? Satou-san, did you..not receive the memo?" I simply answered, "No," and Karaki's bright voice suddenly turned grim. "I have to apologize for that. I thought we had contacted everyone affected by it..." "..." "Satou-san, you are aware of the Castle of Illusions Murder case, aren't you? The one happening in Tokyo, in Chofu right now." "...Yes." "I see. We have yet to be told the details either, but you see, Seiryouin-san was invited along with Oota to the Castle of Illusions, and the two of them got dragged into the case. And unfortunately, we have been informed that Seiryouin Ryuusui-san passed away on the first day."

"Was it a murder?" "We don't know for sure, but likely. We wish to confirm it as soon as possible." "..." "But the police seem to have yet to enter the castle, so—"

Karaki kept speaking after that but I hung up.

The Castle of Illusions' party was on the first of February. The same day we'd received *Episode Two*, so if the Kodansha Novels Seiryouin Ryuusui was the same Seiryouin Ryuusui who watched over me and there wasn't any other writer, I might not receive an *Episode Three* or *Episode Four*.

That was for the better, I thought.

I had to search for Seshiru and Serika, a thought spurred in my head. They should now have gone by Inugami Yasha and Kirika Mai. I first looked up their names on the internet. Searching for 'Seshiru' and 'Serika' in katakana only got results of foreigner top models, cars, movie/anime characters, and guitar names. Searching with the kanji gave no results. With 'Inugami Yasha' and 'Kirika Mai' most of the results were about the characters from Seiryouin Ryuusui's Kodansha Novels works...however, I managed to find a homepage titled 'Great

Detectives on Duty.' I clicked on the link and got led to a page with pictures of Seshiru and Serika's nostalgic faces.

They seemed to have properly grown two years older. Their bodies were bigger. Seshiru was still bony but he'd gained some muscles. Serika's shoulders were rounder and her chest bigger. But their dark pupils hadn't changed at all. The names 'Inugami Yasha' and 'Kirika Mai' were written under the pictures with a disclaimer.

'We have Seiryouin Ryuusui-san's permission to use the names Inugami Yasha and Kirika Mai.'

Clicking on their pictures displayed their profiles.

Inugami Yasha
Born on December 16th, 1988.

Kirika Mai
Born on December 16th, 1988.

They were Seshiru and Serika. There was no doubt.

I returned to the top page, saw an icon with 'Diary' written on it and clicked that. They had a per-month index and a per-case index, the latter listing the Locked Room Lord Case, Saimon Family Case, and London Jackie the Ripper Case. I clicked on 'latest diary entry.' It was from two days ago.

February 22nd

The family of one of the Nagoya Serial Decapitation Case's victims asked for our help so we'll be heading out to resolve it. Our updates might be late, please understand~. (Mai)

That was probably a trap. My curse had grown more intense inside Seshiru and Serika, so they likely wanted to lure me out and torture me rather than waiting for me to come to them.

Curses grow.

I wasn't serious when I told them what I did on my last day in West Akatsuki.

I had given up on them after they committed those murders. I was sure they would rot away in their delusional world. It would be for the best if the police were to arrest them and break that world, but they were smart so that was unlikely; I genuinely believed that they would slowly rot away.

I even wished for that to happen.

By the time I'd left the Katou house, soon after Seshiru and Serika, I had already stopped caring about them. Naturally, the only thing on my mind was Suzuki-kun, who had escaped from jail and was headed my way. And ever since I'd come to the Aichi Prefecture I only ever thought about Suzuki-kun, who had been returned to jail, and Katou-kun and Tsutomu who were waiting for her to be officially released. I sometimes checked Suzuki-kun, Katou-kun, and Tsutomu's whereabouts and how they were doing, but I had never once searched for Seshiru and Serika.

The curse I'd engraved onto them didn't hold much meaning to me.

But now that I was looking at these bait pictures and that obvious, desperate trap, I couldn't help but feel a sense of duty. I had engraved an X on the left of Seshiru's chest and swore I would pierce it and kill him, while I had inflicted a straight cut onto Serika's belly and told her that, when she would eventually have a child, I would come to steal it from her and devour it. Their fear of the curse had led them to set up this homepage in a dire attempt to bait me.

I clicked on the 'per-case index' button and read through the contents of the Locked Room Lord Case, the Saimon Family Case, and the London Jackie the Ripper Case, but they were just variants on the synopsis of the Kodansha Novels books *Cosmic*, *Joker*, and *The Saimon*

Family Case with changes that made them seem like they'd actually happened. So for most people this would appear to be a standard Seiryouin Ryuusui fansite. Just a weird couple cosplaying and using the names of great detective characters. But it was actually a trap for me. In other words, this diary entry from the 22nd of February was a sneaky way of telling me, "We know you're in Nagoya and we are too. You can't hide forever, so come out and face us."

They knew where I was. They probably weren't attacking me because they thought I had noticed them and had set up a trap for them. Seshiru and Serika would never imagine that I could pay no attention to them after imposing that curse onto them.

Then I shall fall for it, I thought. The spider doesn't approach unless one shakes its nest.

4

I left the house while Emiko, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were still asleep, and decided I would start by turning myself in. I rode the bus to the station, took the train to Toyohashi, then changed trains and headed to Nagoya. There, I went to the Aichi Prefectural Police Headquarters and spoke to the uniform-wearing middle-aged man behind the very first counter.

"Excuse me. The investigation team for Nagoya's Serial Decapitation Case is here, right?"

It was written in the newspaper.

"Uh, yea', it is," the officer said in an informal tone.

"My name is Ryuuguu Jounosuke," I said. "I want to turn myself in as the Serial Decapitation Case's culprit. Would the person in charge of the case happen to be around?"

The officer opened his eyes wide. "Ehh? Huh, whatcha saying?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I choose to remain silent." With that done, if I just zipped my mouth shut now, he would have to take me seriously despite being too beautiful for anyone to picture me as a murderer. Even my young age should come off as natural since the case trended towards younger victims as it went on.

As expected, five plainclothes investigators showed up, said, "Let's

hear what you have to say," and led me to an interrogation room.

"Sit on that chair," one of them said. I abided, then asked, "Could you show me your ID?" The oldest one of the five came out from the back and opened his ID in front of my eyes. Ookubo Kengo. First Violent Crime Investigation Division. Assistant inspector. Okay. He was a big shot.

"Take these sunglasses off, boy," he said. No need to ask, I was about to anyway. I looked down before taking them off. I then slowly raised my head and met eyes with Ookubo Kengo.

Emiko had told me that when someone faints at my beauty, they feel like a fine string is being passed through a small hole that opens under their hair whorl and wrings their brain. Ookubo Kengo might have felt that way as well. Same for the four other officers who fell down one after the other.

Now that everyone was out, the hallway got noisy. It seemed many people were monitoring the room through video cameras or some contraption. I paid no heed to them, stepped over the fallen officers, opened the door, and headed out into the hallway. Without my sunglasses, people would faint at a glance at my face, which might look like I was in possession of a weapon from the side, so I put them back on so as to not get wrongly shot.

However, I seemed to have done so a beat too late; people had me encircled from afar, some of them holding firearms. I had no choice. I undressed to show I wasn't in possession of weapons. I took my duffle coat off, then my sweater, my shirt, my pants, my shoes, and finally pulled down my boxers. I was now naked. Someone at the end of the hallway said, "What the hell are you doing?!" I ignored the question, raised my arms, and started walking. I was too beautiful to be bruised.

Muscular officers jumped at me in an attempt to subdue me when I got closer, so I removed my sunglasses. They fell down one after the other with a gentle and calm smile, as though they had been freed from their bottled up stress, using muscles of their cheeks they normally didn't exert.

"He's using gas!" someone screamed while taking steps back.

I addressed that person, "I am not. I am using my excessive

beauty.”

That man, who had been covering his mouth and nose in fear, also collapsed with an ecstatic smile.

I put my sunglasses back on and continued down the hallway, still butt naked. I saw a huge panel saying ‘First Violent Crime Investigation Division’ hanging down from the ceiling in front of a big door with ‘Detective Ward’ written on it, so I headed there as I walked in between desks. When I entered the room, everyone inside evacuated to the hallway. I walked to the back of the now-deserted room and found a document with the name ‘Ookubo Kengo’ on a certain desk. That desk was the furthest back of the island and seemed to belong to the person in charge of the division. Alright. I opened the files sitting on top of it one at a time and checked the drawers. I could hear voices saying, “Hey! Don’t think you can just open whatever the hell you want!” from outside the room, but ignored them. I found the document I was looking for. It even had pictures. I came to understand everything as I gazed at it.

Including the sorry culprit.

I had killed two birds with one stone. I thought I was plunging inside the lion’s den, but with this I could actually make the opponent fall for my trap.

I had my clothes brought to me from the hallway and just put my boxers on, which caused a *Aaah* of disappointment from all of the female officers and part of the male officers.

Unfazed, I made preparations to resolve the case wearing only boxers.

I pinned the pictures of the spots where the murders had happened and the bodies were found on the whiteboard, then scrupulously double-checked the report on the state of the bodies and the articles left behind by the culprit with the investigators before saying, “Let’s begin—Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko were all hit on the head by a blunt weapon before being decapitated

on the spot, then having their corpses raped, in the same order for all of them. However, there are still more similarities that none of you have noticed—or perhaps you had noticed them but couldn't quite put them into words. Can you tell what they are?"

I then continued exposing my stupid fake resolution. I could make up whatever I wanted, the important part was to make it last for as long as I could, to show off my naked body as much as possible. To show off my white skin, my long limbs, my shoulders, my neck, my back, my hips, how all of these bones were fine and delicate. I naturally didn't forget to sit on a random desk chair, raise my legs, and show glimpses of my crotch through the gap on my boxers. The hints at my sumptuous genitals were bound to stir up a lot of excitement.

The murders had all taken place in Nagoya. → The history of Nagoya. → The origin of the city's name. → 'Nagoya' was homonymous with the Japanese for 'harmonious,' harmony was a prime symbol of Japan, and not only were all the victims Japanese, the crimes had also happened inside Japan. When I pointed that out, someone objected that it happening inside Japan was obvious since they'd taken place in Nagoya, so I answered that inside the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Nagoya, one wasn't quite in Japan. → 'Harmony' was itself homonymous to 'rings,' and there was only one circle that could connect all three crime scenes. → I drew the circle connecting them on a map of Nagoya. → At the dead center of the circle was Nagoya Castle. → The culprit had visited Nagoya Castle. → Someone said that basically everyone living in the city had visited it, so I told them that not many visit it hundreds or thousand of times, and prophesied that the culprit had visited Nagoya Castle at least a few hundred times. → I ordered an expert on Nagoya Castle to be sent to us. → Nagoya was anciently in the Owari Province, 'owari' could mean 'the end.' → This case was a harbinger of the end of the world. → 'The end of the world' appears a lot in the titles of novels. In Murakami Haruki's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, The End of the World is straight up the name of the world the characters live in. As seen in Miyazaki Takako's 1998 *The End of the*

World, Satou Yuuya's 2002 short story *The End of 'The World'*, or Patricia Highsmith's 2001 mystery anthology *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* which was localized in Japan as *Tales of the End of the World*, many novels used that motif in their titles, but they weren't much relevant here. (With his name coming up a second time I considered making Satou Yuuya the culprit, but I would rather avoid creating more chaos than necessary.) → The large number of novels using 'the end of the world' was a clear indicator that many found the end of the world to be a matter of great concern—and so did the culprit, I pointed out. → An individual's death is the end of the world for that person, and a concern for the end of the world is a concern for one's own death. → Nagoya City's 'city' was pronounced 'shi,' like death, which gives us Nagoya Death, therefore Owari Death, 'the end of death,' death times death, the death of death, so creating deaths one after another in Nagoya City revealed an unconscious yearning for 'the end of death,' in other words, a victory over death. → I prophesied that, since the culprit didn't want to die, his self-hatred would prevent him from ever committing suicide no matter how much the murders might escalate. → With the culprit seeking to defeat death, we could see the posthumous rapes of Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko as raping (= violating) death, so overcoming death, while the decapitations were employed to make the corpses look as dead as possible. → However, the vessels to violate death, the corpses, couldn't have been anyone's. The culprit had carefully selected them preemptively. → Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko are not only three Japanese women currently living in Nagoya, they also have similar heights and weights, I said as I showed the results of the autopsy. → We should further focus on their proportions, I said, showing pictures of the three corpses and pointing out that the sizes of their breasts and hips were similar. → The autopsy results have shown that their respective bust-waist-hip measurements were 81-57-82 for Hayashi Izumi, 82-59-85 for Sasaki Azusa, and 80-58-81 for Hirose Neko. → I pointed out that the most important aspect was that their skin colors were almost exactly the same, then aligned three pictures from when they were alive depicting

similar levels of joy. → I picked up a picture of Sasaki Azusa's headless corpse, pointed at the section on her neck, remarked upon the faint white discoloration present in a part, and prophesied that the foundation present around Sasaki Azusa's neck was of a different brand of makeup than what she usually used. (The body had already been given back to the family and was incinerated, so there was no way of confirming anyway. Also, even if the forensics had investigated the products present on her neck and face, they would have stopped when they found out it was foundation, nobody would do a comparative analysis for this. Finding foundation on a woman's face was normal, and it wasn't abnormal that some of it could even be found on her neck.) → Then, I listed all the motives for decapitation used in recent mystery novels. → But in most of these cases, the head was either hidden, moved away from the body, or decorated. Meanwhile, all three of our corpses had the head apparent, not moved, and not decorated; just cut off and left by the body. → Then why had the culprit cut their heads off? I asked. → I waited for a moment, confident that nobody would be able to answer. → I additionally remarked that the culprit had decapitated and raped the bodies after killing them, that he had successfully ejaculated from that, that the three women's statures were similar, and importantly, that their skin colors were similar, with the most crucial key to the solution being the foundation present on Sasaki Izumi's neck—teasing the audience. → Without their heads, these three women's proportions and skin colors were similar, so much that one wouldn't be able to tell them apart, I said. Everyone went silent. → In short, the culprit had chosen women with similar proportions and skin colors for their nearly-identical bodies, stripped them naked, and cut their heads, I said. → I then asked everyone what the foundation that remained on Sasaki Azusa's body, near the section on her neck, but didn't belong to her could mean. → I waited to confirm that everyone stayed silent. → There was another head there. → General confusion. → I connected a random desk's computer to the internet, navigated through it, and downloaded an image from a pornographic website. → Everyone looked at the image depicting a picture of an idol's face plastered on

the face of another nude model, a so-called ‘composite video.’ → The culprit created composites with actual human corpses to obtain a form of sex that remains out of reach with the photograph method. → I waited for a moment while everyone was dumbfounded. → That’s why they were decapitated. That’s why their proportions had to be the same. That’s why their skin colors had to be the same. That’s why Sasaki Azusa’s neck had foundation applied to it, to fix the slight difference in her skin color. → In other words, the culprit was in possession of his idol’s decapitated head. → However, human corpses rot. One cannot have sex with a rotten corpse. Freezing it would prevent the degradation, but one cannot have sex with a frozen corpse either. That’s why the culprit gave up on oral sex, and instead prepared other women’s bodies for him to penetrate with his penis. And he had succeeded in having sex at least three times already. The culprit must be keeping the head of his personal idol inside his freezer to prevent it from rotting. → Now, the question is, whose head is it? I said. → There were many missing women across the country. Some of which might coincidentally be idols. The poor idol who got decapitated and turned into a sex toy might be on that list. However, the list was long. And there was no telling how many of them had been killed. However, focusing on the approach of this case should naturally give away the culprit. → I returned to that computer and accessed another website. I opened a news article by Fukui Newspaper from two years ago. The header was ‘Tenth day of the investigation—the head of Katou Junko-san (35 years old), a housewife in West Akatsuki, Fukui, has yet to be found.’ → An article saying that Seshiru and Serika were put on the wanted list as prime suspects for Kurihara Yurika, Ueda Naoko, and Katou Junko’s murders. → Their faces as shown in an issue of the weekly magazine *FOCUS*. → The pictures of ‘Inugami Yasha’ and ‘Kirika Mai’ on the homepage of the Great Detectives on Duty website, as well as the newest diary entry where they claimed they would resolve Nagoya’s Serial Decapitation Case. → I pointed out that the prime suspects from the serial murder case from two years ago were in Nagoya, and that, now that they had been ‘reborn’ by coming out of someone else’s stomach and erased their

mother, the next step would likely be to grow from children to adults by having intercourse with their 'mother,' so Katou Junko's missing head was surely in the possession of Katou Seshiru and Katou Serika who were using the names Inugami Yasha and Kirika Mai. → I ordered for Seshiru and Serika to be urgently arrested, at the very least for being wanted suspects for Fukui's serial killing, to confirm this theory. → I waited for a few officers to rush out of the room. → I was asked for my name so I answered: I'm the Great Detective Ryuuguu Jounosuke. → *Ooooh.* → Nobody seemed to have read Seiryouin Ryuusui's novels among the officers.

Well, Seiryouin Ryuusui readers should soon become adults and start participating in society, hopefully.

5

As I was blabbering this long, long made-up deduction, I was careful to shake and sometimes raise my firm little butt cheeks.

I overtly put my pants, shoes, shirt, and sweater back on before asking, carrying my duffle coat under my shoulder, where the toilets were. A plainclothes officer said "Over here," and guided me there. That officer was Ookubo Kengo. That had to have been fate, I thought.

As we headed to the toilets I hummed, "Da-da~hn! Blood type divination~!" and asked for Ookubo Kengo's blood type. A. What about the Rh? Plus. Hohooh.

I entered the bathroom. There was nobody inside.

Ookubo Kengo came in too.

He was the culprit.

Serial murderers often see the police as a symbol of power and thus become obsessed with it, dressing like an officer, driving a car that looks like a patrol car, buying guns similar to something an officer might carry, etc. Among them, some actually become police officers. Such begins the nightmare of society: with a powerful criminal. For the sadist Ookubo Kengo, this was heaven. He got to investigate his own crimes. He got to express the cruelty of these

crimes with his own words, and handle great power in order to stop them from reoccurring. He could also create false evidence and directly submit these to investigation meetings. He enjoyed this sneaky display of power. Many officers would be investigating evidence without the slightest clue that it had been falsified by him; seeing that happening boosted his ego.

I noticed the anomaly in the crime scene pictures I had found inside Ookubo Kengo's desk at first glance. In none of Hayashi Izumi's pictures, Sasaki Azusa's pictures, or Hirose Neko's pictures were there any shadows.

The pictures had been taken at night, so with a stroboscope, naturally. There would of course be many sources of light with other officers around. However, shadows can appear anywhere. Random lights wouldn't have eliminated all shadows that may sprawl from a hand or leg onto the ground. A picture of a face-down Hayashi Izumi taken from the right should have a shadow on the left, and yet there weren't any. Nor were there any shadows under Sasaki Azusa's chest despite being found sitting on the emergency stairs. Hirose Neko was lying down inside a thicket of grass, and yet there were no shadows of grass being projected onto her body. That thorough lack of shadows showed that they weren't randomly absent but had been carefully removed from these shots.

Ookubo Kengo had murdered, decapitated, and raped three women. This might have been an attempt at satisfying his perverse sadistic nature by imitating the likes of Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer's necrophiliac acts, but either way, he enjoyed raping those headless corpses. He enjoyed the risk of leaving his sperm at the scene. He then kept memories of his crimes as photographs by bringing in spotlights he'd probably prepared beforehand to the scene, using these to erase all shadows, and capturing the corpses in their best states. Moreover, he enjoyed being in charge of the case. He enjoyed the thrill of mixing his personal pictures with those taken for the investigation. And he enjoyed his own power as he fooled everyone around him. Every day must have been a day trip for the sadist Ookubo Kengo.

Ookubo Kengo enjoyed raping me in a toilet stall. My beauty had

attracted Ookubo Kengo despite him not having a thing for young boys.

Ookubo Kengo penetrated me violently. He rammed against the walls and nearly moaned aloud, so I had to help him out from my delicate position. I put my hands behind his elbows that were hitting the stall's walls, and kissed him when he was on the verge of moaning. I carefully threw off the rhythm at which he was shaking his hips to erase the sound of his crotch hitting my butt.

I couldn't let Ookubo Kengo get arrested right here.

He smeared his A+ type sperm he'd left inside the vaginas of Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko on top of my hips and orgasmed.

He told me, "Don't you fucking tell anyone. I'll kill you if you do," while pulling his pants up and closing his zipper. "I won't," I said. "In exchange, can I stay at your house tonight, mister? I can do much wilder stuff, you know." I removed my sunglasses and took an eyeball out. "If you're into this, I'll even let you fuck my eye sockets."

Ookubo Kengo got turned on and wanted to have brain sex on the spot, so I calmed him down and consoled him with a blowjob. "Tonight, okay? Not before."

I swallowed Ookubo Kengo's A+ type sperm.

I sat down at one of the First Violent Crime Investigation Division's desks while drinking the coffee I'd been handed and waited. Ookubo Kengo contacted me soon enough. Seshiru and Serika had been spotted in a city hotel near Nagoya Station. They were running away. Ookubo stood up so I put my coffee down. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was surely planning on arresting Seshiru and Serika alone and pinning his crimes onto them before killing them both. I watched Ookubo leave the detective ward, then stood up.

He boarded an unmarked patrol car and took off. I took a taxi and followed him.

We entered Nagoya proper. Police sirens were ringing everywhere in the city. If Seshiru and Serika were to be caught by someone else, even Ookubo Kengo wouldn't kill them inside their cell. Doing so

would lose him this ‘power’ he had worked so hard to gain. He would either try to indict them for his crimes or give up on the idea altogether and return to enjoying his rigged investigation game.

I wanted Ookubo Kengo to be the excellent investigator I saw in him. A man who became an assistant inspector because of an obsession with the police must be pretty smart, but Seshiru and Serika were relatively shrewd too, so he couldn’t laze around.

Ookubo drove into a construction site. There were already a few patrol cars in the back. And more incoming given the approaching sirens.

I paid the fee and got out of the taxi. I spotted someone who’d been listening to my made-up deduction with a gleeful smile among the officers rushing to the scene. I called out to him. “Oh, Ryuuguu-kun, you came too?” the young plainclothes officer said.

“Yes. I figured I could help with the arrest.”

“Drop the idea, it’s risky.”

“I’ll be okay. I’m confident I will find them so please follow me, officer.”

I then entered the half-built shopping mall. The young officer followed after me. The younger generation was familiar with mystery novels, so the idea of an officer obeying whatever a great detective might say was deeply ingrained into them.

I looked for Ookubo among all the bare concrete and steel girders. According to the radio of the young officer tagging along with me, they hadn’t been found yet and didn’t seem to have left the construction site. The police seemed confident they were above the third floor. Officers were blocking all the staircases.

I couldn’t let Seshiru and Serika give up and turn themselves in. I had to hurry.

I shook the young officer off. I could hear him going, “Huh? Ryuuguu-kun! Where are you~?! It’s dangerous being alone, come back~!” from afar, but ignored him.

Where was Ookubo Kengo?

There.

Ookubo Kengo was using his brain.

With officers blocking all the staircases, elevators, and escalators, they couldn't get away by simply going up. Their only escape route was the air vents.

Ookubo was walking alone, a plan of the building he'd probably stolen from the site manager spread before him to check the location of the air vents. They hadn't all been completed. Ookubo was scribbling Xs on the plan. I observed him from the shadow of a pillar.

The radio was constantly flooded with reports from the many officers combing through the building. I could hear their muffled voices from his radio.

The officers were stirred up.

I could hear officers running above us, something hitting the ground, and many people yelling.

But Ookubo wasn't showing any panic.

He rarely even took his eyes off the plan. He was walking at a slow and steady pace, staring at the plan and checking the air vents. Ookubo knew. Even if other people screwed up, he would assuredly arrest these two.

I guess that's what it takes to kill three women in just two months, I thought.

Ookubo was a skilled hunter. Calm and sharp-minded.

Crap, I thought, and got away from Ookubo. I couldn't let the other officers corner Seshiru and Serika into entering the air vents and falling into Ookubo's trap.

Once I had taken sufficient distance from him, I broke into a sprint. I was a fast runner. I used to not know how to move my legs back when I lived in that basement in West Akatsuki, but now I was on par with a professional track-and-field athlete, at least in regards to running. I had thoroughly studied how to run fast. On the other hand, I wasn't sure how to kick or jump.

I ran past officers as though I was wind blowing by. I was gone before they even had the time to notice my footsteps and turn around; at most, they could look back and see me in the distance.

I climbed up the stairs faster than the officers' yells could travel through the air. I quickly reached a floor they had yet to explore. I

heard cries and stopped in my tracks.

That was Serika.

Seshiru and Serika, under the names Inugami Yasha and Kirika Mai, were right here. These fraternal twins used to be of similar heights, but their growth had resulted in a height gap. They were way cuter and more handsome than on their homepage picture.

Seeing them filled me with nostalgia.

I wanted to keep watching them from the shadows forever. Seshiru, who had ravished me. Serika, whom I had ravished. Seshiru, who got an urge to be ravished by me. Serika, who was afraid of being ravished by Seshiru yet yearned for it. Seshiru, who refused to ravish Serika yet yearned for it. The me from back then; I had butted in between them, became their toy—their tool—tried to protect them yet hurt them both, yearned for them, and ultimately got abandoned by them.

Their stupid provocation intended at me had resulted in police officers chasing and cornering them. Tears ran down their red cheeks. My cute Seshiru. My cute Serika.

I wanted to keep watching them desperately wandering around this dusty, half-built building from the shadows for eternity.

But the officers were steadily coming closer. And Ookubo Kengo was waiting for them below.

I stepped outside of the pillar's shadow.

"Seshiru, Serika."

They yelped and looked at me. They recognized me. I met eyes with them for the first time in forever, through my sunglasses.

"Gajobun..." Serika said.

I'd completely forgotten that she used to pronounce the name 'Gajobun' so magnificently.

"Hi."

Seshiru was still dumbfounded.

"Why are you here, Gajobun?" Serika asked.

I simply stared at Serika's charming, surprised face in silence until Seshiru went, "It was you?! You fucking tattled on us!"

I yet again simply stared at Seshiru's beautiful glaring face.

"Answer me!"

I spoke,

"You will get arrested before you know it if you keep complaining. Don't you have anything on you? You must at least have a knife, right?"

To stab me with.

Seemingly stimulated by my words, Seshiru took out a military knife from his pocket. It had a sizable, quite robust blade. That might be good enough.

Seshiru pointed it towards the staircase we could hear officers from.

"You got me wrong. How would you fight all these officers with a single knife? Think, Seshiru."

He pointed the knife at me.

"Shut up! You fucking shut your trap!"

Seshiru still wasn't that quick-witted. So much that it was kind of embarrassing.

"Errol Flynn," I said, "that's what I want to get at."

"Huh?"

"It's in an old American movie, haven't you seen it? A ship got attacked by a troupe of pirates, and Errol Flynn jumped down from the mast by stabbing his knife into the sail and riding it all the way down to the deck, effectively ripping it in half. Haven't you seen a scene like that at least?"

"Hell no!"

"Well, at least you get the idea, don't you? I mean, that's your last option."

"..."

Seshiru looked around anxiously so I told him, "Give up on escaping through the air vents in *Die Hard*-fashion. There's a scary officer waiting for you there."

Tears welled up to his eyes.

I addressed Serika,

"Serika, it's been a while."

"...Yeah."

"Please make sure Seshiru gets away. You understand what I want you to do?"

"...I do."

"Good. See you, and good luck. I'm going by the name Ryuuguu Jounosuke and will stay at Officer Ookubo Kengo's house tonight."

I then left that floor. I couldn't have officers witness me talking to these two. Seshiru should be fine with Serika by his side. They were both idiots, but together they could do some bold things. Like killing women and slicing their stomachs open.

I moved up one floor, pretending I hadn't found Seshiru and Serika. Officers followed after me. When they eventually came down while repeating they couldn't find anything and left the building, the sheet covering the building was now adorned with a long slit. It had started at the eighth floor and slowly cut through it down to the first floor.

Everything was going smoothly.

6

I headed to the detached house Ookubo Kengo was living in and inspected the surroundings in lieu of ringing the doorbell. There seemed to be a garden behind the house, but that was actually a cemetery full of sloppily-buried corpses. Digging a bit with a shovel revealed a mountain of women's rotten corpses. There seemed to be a few boys as well. All these women, girls, and boys were, without exception, missing their heads. Poor Ookubo Kengo, he could probably only get aroused if he first cut their heads off.

The cemetery must extend further than the garden, probably under the floor as well, I thought and looked around to find a window inches above the ground. A basement. Looking closer, it had a bed and various tools. It seemed like Ookubo's mind traveled back to the Vietnam War when torturing people. A military uniform from the People's Army of Vietnam during the war was decorating one of the

walls. There was also a People's Army's flag. It looked like the saying that sadism and masochism are interchangeable was true; using the People's Army as a theme, he could enjoy torturing prisoners of war but also being screwed by Americans. Very logical. Hoh, I found myself impressed upon noticing the shelves full of Vietnamese textbooks. He had put a lot of care into nurturing this fantasy. Even so, I still wouldn't want to live in this basement.

I stood up, returned to the front, and rang the doorbell. Ookubo Kengo cheerfully welcomed me. He was wearing an apron and I could pick up a smell of oil coming from further in the house.

A giant smile on his face, he took me to the kitchen where a mountain of croquettes was waiting for me on the table, making me want to go back home as soon as possible. My stomach was already full.

My worries were unnecessary, Ookubo Kengo didn't make me sit down immediately. He jumped at me the moment he removed his apron. *Pow!* He punched me and sent me rolling to the neighboring room with a tatami mat floor. My nose started bleeding. I looked up but Ookubo was already right there—*Bah!* He kicked my face. His feet kept grinding my head against the tatami mat. My teeth were slowly breaking inside my mouth. When his enormous foot finally got away from my cheek, it was only for his toes to crush my nose the next moment. *Creeeek!* This high-pitched noise rippled all the way into my brain. My nose was broken. My face was a bloody mess. Ookubo Kengo's thirst of destruction for my face must come from his own ugly face. Ookubo Kengo had an impact on the scale of an atomic bomb in terms of ugliness.

"Hey, hey, boy, can I remove your eyes now?" he asked, so I nodded. Ookubo Kengo's fat and mochi-like, plumpy fingers penetrated my eye sockets. *Ewwww, hah hah hah hah hah, phew, huuuh, eh.* Ookubo Kengo was producing all sorts of sounds in his excitement. He took my eyes away.

But I could see.

Ookubo Kengo tossed my eyeballs towards a drawer and impatiently pulled my pants down, almost tearing it off, and promptly

inserted his penis inside my anus. I waited for Ookubo Kengo to finish as he grated my face against the tatami mat and sniffed the scent of blood off my face. It shouldn't take too long with how aroused he was.

And indeed, he was quick. For his first shot. But there was a second. And a third. He kept thrusting at me.

He once tried the eye socket sex he was lusting after, but his penis was so big only his glans could go inside. I felt bad for Ookubo so I applied lotion to it. This time he was able to insert it all the way to the base. Ookubo's penis directly poked at my brain. My brain's delicate structure crumbled away. It wasn't painful. The brain doesn't have pain receptors. I merely felt a vague squeezing and a feeling of numbness, followed by a hot fluid that wasn't blood coming out of my nose. The thought that he was raping my brain must have overflooded Ookubo Kengo with excitement. He came after only two quick thrusts. Ookubo then pulled his penis out of my head and flipped over on the tatami mat.

He rested a bit while repeating, "I'm out, I'm out," then said, "Let's go eat," and stood up. I headed to the bathroom to wash the blood and sperm off, then came back, picked up my eyeballs by the drawer, and put them back in.

I also put my sunglasses on.

I couldn't make Ookubo Kengo faint when I didn't know when Seshiru and Serika would come.

Ookubo Kengo tried to make me eat his croquettes, but I couldn't feel like ingesting anything. When I voiced that feeling, a croquette flew off his hand and exploded on my face.

Seshiru and Serika would assuredly come to kill me. Running and hiding away from me had pushed their lacking brain cells to take up the title of great detectives and lay out a trap for me. Even if they knew I was staying at an officer's house, they would for sure check on me. I could then have Ookubo Kengo kill Seshiru and Serika. They surely wouldn't doubt an officer to be a sadistic serial murder. ...So I waited for them, but they were taking their sweet time. I finished eating the croquettes and Ookubo's penis got hard again, so we moved

to the torture room in the basement where he violated me even more roughly. And yet Seshiru and Serika showed no sign of coming. He took my eyeballs off. He penetrated my sockets with his penis. He lasted longer this time. He made a mess out of my brain. I wouldn't be able to make him faint when the time came without my eyeballs, so I carefully hid them. I checked my face in the mirror. I was still beautiful. Too beautiful, as always. I nearly fainted at my own beauty.

Ookubo put handcuffs around my wrists as I was dizzy from my own beauty. He attached the other end to the bed. He made me raise both arms and attached them to the headboard.

I got fed up with this. I decided to make Ookubo faint and slowly kill him. I could always capture Seshiru and Serika and kill them another way.

"Hey," I said.

Ookubo Kengo grabbed the uniform off the wall and started putting it on.

" " he said something in Vietnamese, but I couldn't speak the language.

"Hey, mister," I said, but Ookubo Kengo was single-mindedly putting on the uniform, not giving me a single glance.

"Hey, come on, look at me when I speak," I said.

"After I cut your head off," Ookubo Kengo said in Japanese. "I wouldn't want to faint, you see."

Ookubo Kengo had learned after fainting once. He was smart. And his obsession with decapitating people meant he wasn't the type of person to desperately want to see beautiful faces again and again.

Now in his military uniform, he said something in Vietnamese and left the room. I could hear his military boots walking up the stairs.

Whatever. He would inevitably have to look at my face when cutting it off. I would make him faint then.

Ookubo came back, an electric chainsaw in hand. He pulled the trigger and it went *RWEEEEEEHH!* He pointed the round blade revolving at high speeds my way. The blade was actually near my flank since he was looking away the whole time.

"You won't get a good cut like that, you know it," I said, trying to

make Ookubo look at me, when the basement's door was slammed open. *Bam!*

"Hey, the fuck are you doin' to my lil bro!?"

Seshiru said and barged into the room. He was holding the military knife I'd seen on that building's eighth floor.

Ookubo Kengo made the blade he'd just stopped spin again. *RWEEEEEEH!* He swung the chainsaw horizontally and barely missed shredding Seshiru's chest open. Seshiru stepped in. He stabbed Ookubo Kengo's torso with his military knife, or so it seemed, but Ookubo actually avoided the blade at the last moment after it cut his uniform and used that inertia to ram his body against Seshiru. *Thomp!* Ookubo Kengo's massive body slammed against Seshiru's head and blasted his slender body away. *TRRRRRRR!* He swung the electric chainsaw down to split Seshiru like a pizza, but Seshiru dodged that and thrust his knife. It, however, didn't reach Ookubo's neck; Ookubo had intercepted Seshiru's arm with his right hand. He pulled the chainsaw's trigger with his left hand, *VHHHHHHH!*, and began cutting Seshiru's torso from the side with the silver, revolving blade. It was Serika who then hit Ookubo's head with a stun baton.

That freed Seshiru's hand and let him cut Ookubo Kengo's throat with his military knife.

"Guh," Ookugo Kengo gasped before going down. *GSHHHHH!* The electric chainsaw protested on the floor and tried to cut at Seshiru's foot, who dodged that and kicked Ookubo Kengo's head.

"The fuck were you gonna do to my lil bro?!"

Seshiru screamed, blood gushing out of his flank, before stabbing Ookubo Kengo's back again and again with his military knife. Again and again and again. The uniform was in shambles and steeped in blood. Even so, Seshiru didn't put a rest to his frantic thrusts. The knife pierced through Ookubo Kengo's chest and, *Thud!*, stabbed the floor. He pulled it out and stabbed Ookubo Kengo's chest again.

Seshiru was scared. Of Ookubo Kengo. And of having his chest

stabbed.

“Serika,” I called out to Serika, who was gripping the stun baton tight and standing stock still. “Pick up that key over there.” She picked up the handcuffs’ key from the floor. “Undo the handcuffs,” I said. She put the stun baton down on the bed, walked up to the pillow with the key, and removed my handcuffs.

I asked Serika,

“Serika, do you know Seiryouin Ryuusui?”

“What?”

Serika’s eyes were in tears. Lovely.

“It’s an author’s name.”

“Huh? Never heard of them...”

I couldn’t sense falsehood in Serika’s eyes.

Whatever.

I picked up the stun baton, pressed it against Serika, and turned it on.

A brief shrilling sound rippled across the room, followed by Serika falling down to the floor.

That finally stopped Seshiru’s knife.

“Huh, wait... The fuck are you doing?”

I got off the bed.

“But we even saved you...” Seshiru said, covered in blood.

“Well, my plan was to kill you from the very start,” I said. “Also, don't you remember? I said I would kill you that one time.”

“But why...”

“Still, I’m glad you recognized me as your little brother.”

“...Then—”

“But you are no longer a Katou.”

“I’m...”

“Seshiru,” I said. I paid no heed to the contradiction that arose from using that name. “Do you know Seiryouin Ryuusui?”

“Eh?”

“Seiryouin Ryuusui. He’s an author.”

“Eh? ...I don’t, why?”

“I see. Nevermind that, then.”

I grabbed the sword hanging off the wall and unsheathed it. A saber from the People’s Army. I stabbed Seshiru’s left torso with the tip of the saber, pierced his heart, and killed him.

“I love you, Seshiru. I loved you, Seshiru. I wanted to be your brother.”

I dressed Seshiru up in my clothes and put his on. I left my wallet in his pocket. I put his wallet inside my pocket. I swung the saber sideways and cut Seshiru’s head off. I put it inside Ookubo Kengo’s bag.

I washed my face, put on the duffle coat to hide the blood on my shirt, wore the bag with Seshiru’s head on my shoulders, and, carrying the unconscious Serika, left Ookubo Kengo’s house.

I took a taxi to Nagoya Station and called the Aichi Prefectural Police.

“Ah, excuse me, my name is Katou Seshiru,” I said. “Yes. The one currently wanted, yes, this one. I’m not exactly calling you to turn myself in, I just want to report something. There is an inspector called Ookubo Kengo-san in your First Violent Crime Investigation Division, isn’t there? Yes. He is the culprit of Nagoya’s Serial Decapitation Case. There are many pieces of evidence at his domicile. ...Ookubo Kengo-san has passed away. Also, the Great Detective Ryuuguu Jounosuke-san who visited your office earlier today passed away as well. Ookubo Kengo-san killed Ryuuguu Jounosuke, and I killed Ookubo Kengo-san. Yes. I am Katou Seshiru. Ryuuguu Jounosuke-san’s real name is Katou Tsukumojuuku. He is my little brother. Yes. I have to go now, have a good day.”

I hung up, picked up Serika who had been unconscious inside the waiting room, and returned to the taxi. I had Seshiru’s head with me. The police would think Ookubo Kengo hid his head somewhere. They

would find many corpses by searching around the house. Many heads as well. They would surely take time to verify my identity in the confusion. There were no records of my fingerprints or clinical records anywhere, so they might settle on my identity from my wallet alone and declare Katou Tsukumojuuku dead.

I was Katou Seshiru. Inugami Yasha. A great detective. My sister was Serika. Kirika Mai. A great detective.

I would now head to the Castle of Illusions and have a talk with Seiryouin Ryuusui.

7

A phone rang in the darkness. Next to the triplets, Emiko extended her hand and answered the phone.

“Yes?” she said.

That call was from me.

“Uhh…where are you now?” Emiko asked. Her eyes were still shut.

Far away, I answered.

“What are you doing… Where exactly?”

I will draw the line regarding Seiryouin Ryuusui, I said.

“Stop that…just come home. You don’t need to do all that…”

You were sleeping? I asked.

“Yeah. …I got so much sleep. I mean, I’m still kinda asleep, even… What time is it right now?”

Two in the morning.

“What, already…? Why are you out this late…”

I’m already pretty far away so I won’t come back until I’ve cleared the situation with Seiryouin Ryuusui.

“What… That’s so stupid.”

It is.

“Do whatever.”

I love you, Emiko, I wanted to say but she hung up before I could.

Emiko put the phone back on the charger and went back to sleep.

The triplets were still sleeping. These four would fall into an equally profound slumber.

I appeared inside Emiko's dream to continue that phone call, but she was still angry at me. We had a fight. Even inside her dreams Emiko hung up on me, saying, *Do Whatever*.

"Do whatever. You're cursed, you know that? You can till the earth all you want, it won't produce anything. You're damned to be a vagabond on Earth. But because of that malediction, whoever slays you will find themselves cursed sevenfold."

Episode 5
9+9+9
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

Rie came back from the grocery store so I helped her take the eggs, onions, spinach, natto, etc. out of the Seiyuu bag and into the refrigerator when I heard more voices coming from the Castle of Illusions. Calls for help. Mixed with screams and sobs. They came from atop the castle's spire, so it would be more proper to say they came *down* from the castle. Screams, sobs, and something that sounded like an anger one doesn't know how to vent were coming down from there. Falling down. Falling onto us and the other dozens of people living nearby Chofu's Castle of Illusions. Unlike me, most people seemed to withstand the situation pretty well. Some even replied to the calls, screaming, *Sorry we can't do anything for you*, or, *Shut up! Give up on asking us for help and figure that shit among yourselves*, or even more heartless, *Stop pestering us and die in silence*. Most families with children in elementary and middle school had moved to relatives' houses or facilities the city of Chofu had prepared for them, but the remaining families lived among the daily, hourly screams of agony and despair.

There was nothing we could do. Rie and I usually stopped talking when we heard voices from the Castle of Illusions, but we weren't really listening to them. We were like everyone around us—merely overlooking the grief emanating from the castle. Living each day in a normal fashion. Rie and I put away the newly-acquired food, Saran wrap, and toothpaste into the fridge and suitable shelves.

Half a year will have passed this month.

The casualties inside the castle exceeded 180 people. Back in February we'd been informed that about 200 people were trapped inside the castle, but that number was likely way off. There seemed to be at least 100 people still alive inside the castle. With 200, the numbers wouldn't match. A rumor was circulating among the people inside the Castle of Illusions and the ones keeping in contact with them through their cellphones, suspecting that people who weren't initially inside the castle had somehow found their ways in. The people inside asked us, "If new people can come in there must be a

passage connecting us, please find it and get us out of here," but the people outside replied, "If there's a way out, find it yourself and leave." Both of them were naturally looking for that hidden passage, but nothing had come out of that search. With the constant panic from The Artist's daily streak of murders, the people inside didn't have the mental capacity to keep track of who was there from the start and who came later. Everyone just found a spot to hide and settled there. Dozens of people had been reported missing in the past six months, some of whom were eventually found to be living inside the castle. All of them claimed they'd been initially invited to the party, attended it, and were present when the castle's owner Yanbe Tetsuo was anonymously murdered among a crowd and when the author Seiryouin Ryuusui's corpse was disovered inside a locked room. And these new people were equally murdered by the serial killer calling themselves The Artist. A common theory these days was that The Artist had an accomplice outside the castle who kidnapped a bunch of people and sent them to the castle through this supposed passage that had yet to be found so The Artist never runs out of people to murder. Nobody in Chofu ever walked alone at night anymore. Rie and I also just stayed inside after sunset.

Now that we'd put all the groceries away, Rie said, "Oh, I forgot to buy edamame beans...but eh, should be fine," then headed to our room on the second floor, checked on Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest before sitting on the edge of the bed and rereading *Episode Four*. Inside that novel sent to us by a mysterious 'Seiryouin Ryuusui,' I was trapped inside the Castle of Illusions as the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku and solved the serial murder case perpetrated by The Artist. In *Episode Four*, I pointed out that all of the 333 murders that had happened inside the Castle of Illusions were something 'I' (*Episode Four*'s narrator and great detective 'Tsukumojuuku') had dreamed up —hallucinated—and never actually occurred, despite 'me' still being inside that dream. But regardless of that complicated ending, the case had settled. None of the tricks for the story's many 'impossible murders' had been explained in any capacity. Those murders were part of a dream and had never taken place, so there was obviously no

need to solve anything. Nobody had died and The Artist was 'me' (the narrator/great detective 'Tsukumojuuku'), so there was no need to arrest the 'culprit' either. 'I' pointed out from within 'my' dream that it was all something 'I' had dreamed up, and both the case and the story concluded without ever leaving said dream. Rie felt relieved upon reading that story, like everything had been resolved. A case's resolution can simply be an elimination of the core problem. I was of the same mind. Let's take the current murders actually happening in the Castle of Illusions without me inside as an example; if I were to genuinely believe in the conclusion that what I perceived as reality was actually a dream and had never taken place, that I was living inside a dream and not in reality, and, despite being aware of existing inside a dream, that dream remained as realistic as reality, such that I wouldn't feel the need to return to the actual reality and would just accept that dream as my reality and keep living inside it, it would put an end to that problem. However, I wasn't distressed enough by the Castle of Illusions Case to feel like believing my reality to be a dream, so I didn't. I wasn't inside the castle. I was *close* to it, but still outside. The Artist had only murdered inside the castle so far, so I didn't have to worry about being killed for the moment. The operation to break through the Castle of Illusions' iron walls was still progressing at a quick pace, so the police would surely enter the castle and arrest The Artist before they leave the castle and start killing more people outside. I was waiting for that to happen.

Rie couldn't wait that long. She was reading *Episode Four*. She yearned for the conclusion that everything happened inside the 'Great detective Tsukumojuuku's' dream. Reading *Episode Four* had been her only way to cope with the ongoing case lately. Which is natural given how long it had been going on for. People screaming at all hours of the day for half a year, being killed en masse closeby. Rie was also imagining the situation unfolding inside too vividly. She was too desperate to help people that were damned.

One night, after an eternally-long wailing coming from the castle had come to an end, Rie had asked me, "Tsutomu, shouldn't you go to the Castle of Illusions? I mean, you *are* Tsukumojuuku." "Don't you

think you have a role reserved for you inside the castle?" "Could it be that you're actually a great detective and only you can solve the case happening inside?" "Don't you think The Artist is waiting for you to come, Tsutomu?"

I had to endure Rie's barrage of questions that went on for a whole night after already ignoring the wailing coming from the castle.

"I'm not a great detective." "The Artist can't possibly be waiting for me." "*Episode Four* is just a fictional story written by someone claiming to be Seiryouin Ryuusui. It has nothing to do with me."

But I didn't know whether it actually had nothing to do with me. Someone claiming to be Seiryouin Ryuusui had irregularly sent me novels titled *Episode One*, *Episode Two*, *Episode Three*, and *Episode Four*, all containing information one would need to know me very well to obtain. They also had a bunch of fabrications, but some things were true. I was indeed too beautiful, Tsutomu was my non-blood-related little brother, and Seshiru and Serika had killed Kurihara Yurika, Ueda Naoko, and their own mother before escaping. However, most of the things related to the *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* mitate were fake. In other words, the Creation mitate from *Episode One* that was hinted to be my doing and the scene with the old me coming out of Ueda Yuuko's stomach and screaming, "Hallelujah!" had never taken place. In *Episode Two*, the phone call with the "It has come to pass," the Armageddon that supposedly took place in Chofu, the mitate of the men scorched by the sun with 'Ubamatsu Yoshio's' combustion, the mitate of water changed into blood with 'Ueda Yuuko' floating inside a blood-filled bathtub, the huge amount of dead fish pushed ashore onto the beach, and the mitate of Adam and Eve I'd created with the murder of 'Hayashi Izumi,' 'Sasaki Azusa,' and 'Hirose Neko' had never taken place. *Episode Three*'s mass decapitations orchestrated by 'Ookubo Kengo,' which seemed to be a mitate of angels reaping the earth, as well as me killing Seshiru and making it seem as though 'Katou Seshiru' had murdered his little brother 'Katou Tsukumojuuku,' likely a mitate of Cain and Abel, and 'Satou Emiko's' last words which resembled God's curse upon Cain were fake too. The mass murders inside the Castle of Illusions from *Episode Four* can be parallelled to

the War in Heaven in a way, and for all I knew there might actually be one male and one female of every animal inside the castle to fill Noah's Ark, and the people inside might be getting killed one after the other for the sole reason that they were more numerous than one man and one woman; also the castle could very well be, in addition to that, the Tower of Babel, with people getting killed after climbing too high and provoking God's ire. That being said, none of it could be confirmed from outside the castle. Anyway, the remark 'I' ('the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku') had made on my name, where if you turn it into a number and flipped it upside down you get 666, the number of the beast, had never actually been mouthed.

I wasn't the antichrist beast. I hadn't inflicted sores upon 'Hayashi Izumi,' 'Sasaki Azusa,' and 'Hirose Neko's' stomachs to represent the mark of the beast. I didn't have ten horns nor seven heads. And the name of blasphemy wasn't written on my head.

I was just a normal human who happened to be too beautiful.

Not a great detective. There were many things I didn't know.

I had no idea why all four episodes had both mitate of *Genesis*, the very start of the Old Testament, and *Revelation to John*, the last part of the New Testament. I also didn't understand why the mitate of *Genesis* progressed in order from the start while the *Revelation to John*'s mitate started from the end. Neither sides' mitate were over, but I had no idea what would happen next. On the *Genesis* side, the story about Adam and Eve's descendants continued for a while, and we still had the whole deal with the Seven Seals left for *Revelation to John*. The impostor assuming the late Seiryouin Ryuusui's name might plan on introducing mitate based on the episodes of Abraham, Lot, Isaac, and Jacob, and I might become the victim of cases using mitate of the Seven Seals in their *Episode Five* and *Episode Six*.

Still, no matter who that 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' may be, no matter what they might write in their novels, and no matter how the manuscripts arrive to me, these were only novels. I would merely accept and read them. Nothing more. Someone whose identity I didn't know was watching me from somewhere I didn't know and writing novels about me. They were writing about my private life. But as far

as I knew it's not like they were getting published or read by anyone else; only Rie and I read these novels, and we weren't especially hurt by them. If anything, Rie had felt much better after reading 'me' resolving the Castle of Illusions Murder Case in *Episode Four*. I was a bit troubled by Rie's unfounded expectations for the real me that it created, but that was about it. Not a whole lot of damage. Far from that, I was actually looking forward to receiving *Episode Five*. Rie was too. "Why am I not in these?" She was frustrated and jealous over Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest being in them but their mother not being her there. "Come on~. My stomach got huge like a yoga ball and I did my darndest to birth them, and yet total strangers are stealing all the credits for that~," Rie complained. I told her, "But 'Hayashi Izumi,' 'Sasaki Azusa,' 'Hirose Neko,' and 'Satou Emiko,' all the mothers, ended up either murdered or separated from me." "I mean, it's not like I just want us to be and live together," she replied. "There's a manner of living, just like how there's a manner of being together."

Exactly.

There was also a manner of dying.

There is this school of thought which suggests that mystery novels soared in popularity as devices promoting a privileged death due to a general revolt against the mass deaths which flourished during the world wars, but the deaths portrayed in mystery novels are in no way privileged. A true privileged death is a death regretted by everyone, a death that comes after enduring sicknesses and pain for as long as possible and using up all of one's lifeforce, a death surrounded by family and friends and many strangers, a death desired and chosen both in timing and method, and a timely death. A privileged death is only possible in the real world, in the banal world; it is a peaceful and solemn death.

Nobody wishes to be killed through some niche and complicated trick. Nobody wishes to be killed in a locked room nobody knows how to get in and out of. To begin with, when someone yearns for a privileged death, they don't wish to be murdered. Furthermore, they

don't wish to become a tool for some random mitate and thus lose their personhood after being killed. *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* are famous, respected, and grandiose stories, but nobody would be okay getting murdered for a mitate of them.

How one wants to die and how one wants their corpse to be seen after their death are two different things. Even if some people might wish to be projected as God through a mitate of the Bible, nobody wants to die just to make it happen. A real privileged death can only be achieved by dying your own death. By dying after obtaining what you yearned for. Solemnly. Dignifiedly. By everyone around you grieving because they lost you. By being regretted. By others wanting you to live some more. Good memories. A sense of satisfaction. Self-confidence. Assurance that you have led a good life. The joy of dying a death you are content with.

That kind of death doesn't exist inside mystery novels.

If mystery novels' popularity really exploded because of the mass production of death during the wars, that wouldn't be because they tried to resurrect the reduced respect for death, but because they made good use of it. With people's respect for death now lessened, mystery novels could kill characters more easily, they could hurt them more easily, they could play with them more easily. They could now use impromptu bloodthirst and nonsensical motives, they could now describe the mental state of characters facing death more casually. And, most importantly, they no longer needed to waste their brains on respecting people's deaths.

The only way for one to attain a privileged death within a mystery novel would be if its story has a suicide disguised as a homicide. Then it would depend on whether they were able to die in a way satisfying to them.

However, even that is destined to fail once a 'great detective' comes into play.

I hoped that the people being killed every day inside the Castle of

Illusions were, in the same way *Episode Four* ended with everything being 'my' ('the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku's') dream, dying the death they'd wished for and merely disguised it as a homicide. I hoped that's what was actually going on inside the real Castle of Illusions. The Great Detective Tsukumojuuku wasn't in the real castle, so people could die a privileged death all they wanted.

However, I couldn't believe in that reality. I had been hearing screams coming from the Castle of Illusions day in, day out, and simply knew they weren't the act of people dying their privileged deaths like I wanted them to.

2

We were eating the deep-fried mackerel Rie had prepared for lunch when I suddenly felt a bizarre sensation inside my stomach and put my chopsticks down.

"What happened?" Rie asked.

"My stomach hurts. Like, extremely," I replied. "There's something inside."

"Oh, were the mackerel bones that big? They're usually fine, though..."

"It's not the mackerel. I'm not talking about something stuck in my throat, it's in my stomach...no, a bit below the organ. It's big and hard, what could it be?"

I put a hand on my stomach and immediately took it back.

"What the!?"

"What is it?"

"There's...I don't know, something pointy inside my belly."

"Eh? Come on, what are you talking about?"

"It's hard... What is this? Ouch ouch ouch."

"What, can I touch it?"

Rie went around the table and crouched next to me. She raised her white and slender hand then rested it on the area above my belly button.

"A bit lower."

"...Oh my god. This ain't good. It's kinda hard, huh."

“It is. And it hurts.”

“This definitely isn’t a mackerel bone. I mean, it’s too big.”

“It sure isn’t. Well, I’ve been telling you that for a while now.”

“Wanna go to the toilet?”

“I don’t think this will come out that way.”

“Then the hospital, huh. Think you can stand up?”

I tried getting on my feet. But the severe pain in my stomach kicked in, I couldn’t even straighten my spine. I curled up to rounden my slim stomach and stayed still on the chair.

“This seriously hurts.”

I ran the tip of my right middle finger on my stomach to feel the shape of the trespassing object. It had a flat surface and steep angles. It was square. Like a pretty thick square plank.

It wasn’t alive. It wasn’t moving and didn’t have limbs. It was just a square thing.

I knew exactly what it was.

A book.

There was a book inside my stomach.

Having realized so, I couldn’t wait any longer.

“Rie, bring me a knife please.”

“Eh? Why?”

“I’ll cut it open.”

“Ehh!? Cut it...? Don’t be stupid, I won’t let you.”

“There’s something weird inside my stomach.”

“Yeah, let’s go to the hospital. I’ll call an ambulance.”

“Bring me a knife.”

“Just be patient. I’ll call them now!”

Rie ran into the living room where the phone was. I scrutinized the dining table. No knives. I looked at the kitchen. The knives were far away. I put my elbows on the table and tried lifting my bottom. A searing pain coursed through my ears. I had been sitting at the table and eating miso soup, deep-fried mackerel, potatoes, and boiled asparagus without any problems until moments ago, but a book had suddenly barged inside my stomach and was making me writhe in pain.

Rie said, “It’s probably appendicitis or something like that... Oh, maybe stomach cramps even. Anyway, I need you to come as soon as possible,” on the phone, but this wasn’t appendicitis or stomach cramps. There was a book inside my stomach.

I fell down onto the floor. The pain originating from my stomach rippled through my body and made me feel like my brain had exploded into a million pieces. I would crawl on the floor to get a knife from the kitchen.

I had to get this book out of my belly, I thought. God’s words should be inscribed inside it. The little book John took from an angel and ate up upon being ordered to do so by God. It was sweet as honey, but bitter to John’s stomach.

I could tell.

The continuation to the Bible mitate from *Episode One* to *Four* had begun.

Revelation to John chapter ten verses eight and nine. The ‘book which is open’ was inside my stomach.

I didn’t know why fictional mitate were now happening in reality. I didn’t know how this book had found its way inside my stomach. These mitate shouldn’t be taking place in reality, so this might be happening inside a fictional reality I merely happened to believe was real. But this pain. This pain. This agony was shredding my delusions. This was taking place in reality. I felt like rusted screws were forcefully being ripped out of the back of my skull.

Unable to bear it any longer, I grabbed the plate which had the rest of my deep-fried mackerel and made it drop onto the ground. *Crash, wahn wahn wahn wahn...* I picked up a plate shard from under the mackerel’s sauce, lifted my shirt, and thrust the pointy part into the area under my stomach where the book was. I ran it sideways. My stomach’s skin split open like a crushed grape and, as I’d thought, a book came out of it. Thankfully, it was wrapped in a vinyl bag. A white FamilyMart bag. The opening was twisted and tied into a knot. But I could faintly make out the title. The book’s cover was quite colorful. I could see the word *Tsukumojuuku*. My name. That was the title.

My consciousness was fading with all the blood gushing out of my open stomach.

But the pain had lessened now that the book was out. I opened the vinyl bag and took the book out.

The imprint was Kodansha Novels.

Tsukumojuuku - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Give me a freaking break, I thought. I didn't know what kind of grudge he had against me, but man...

3

I woke up not under the dining table but on a bed in Chofu Central Hospital, the Kodansha Novels-imprint *Tsukumojuuku* missing and my stomach closed up. *Tsukumojuuku* had vanished from my hand and been replaced by one of Rie's palms.

Rie was seated on a chair next to my bed, resting her forehead on my other hand on the bed and sleeping. We were in an individual room, with the sun setting outside the window, coloring the white walls of the Parco in front of the station in an orange tint. The green letters writing out 'PARCO' comforted me. I had a feeling that the world had ended while I was asleep. But it was still going. At least for now.

The *book* had left my stomach.

Revelation to John was still ongoing. This mitate progressed in a backwards order, so next should be the opening of the seventh seal. The seventh seal opens with seven angels sounding seven trumpets. And the seventh angel sounds the seventh trumpet after giving John the book, so, given the reverse order, the mitate of the seventh trumpet must have taken place *before* the Kodansha Novels-imprint book had landed inside my stomach. But of course, there's no guarantee the entirety of *Revelation to John* would be turned into a mitate, I thought, extending my hand to press the nurse call button. A nurse came in after some time. "Ah, Ishida-san, you're finally

awake~," she said with a smile. "Please bring me today's morning and evening newspaper," I asked her. That woke Rie up. "Oh, Tsutomu. How do you feel?" she asked. "Please hold on a moment, I'll go call a doctor," the nurse said and left the room. I told her, "Please bring the newspaper urgently." She popped her head in-between the almost-closed door and said, "Aye sir."

And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders, who sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshiped God, offering Him words of gratitude for his reign. And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.

"Rie, the book, do you have it with you?" I asked.

"What book?"

"The one that came out of my stomach."

"What are you saying? No books have come out of anyone's stomach."

I pulled the blanket off and my shirt up to show Rie my stomach.

It was smooth as silk.

My abs were unscathed. There wasn't even a scar from stitches or sutures.

"Rie, how many years have passed?"

"Since what?"

"Since I complained about my stomach hurting while we were eating."

"That was today."

Rie could very well have been lying to me.

"Rie, give me your cell."

I connected the phone to the internet. I manually entered the URL

and accessed *Yahoo!*. I checked the headlines. The date was today's. The news pieces I'd seen this very morning were still there. I typed in random words into *Yahoo!* and ran a search. 'kewpie' 'message board.' The first result was a message board using a Kewpie doll as the icon called 'Kewpie-chan's board.' I posted, "What time is it?"

"Why are you trolling on message boards all of a sudden?" Rie asked. The screen returned to showing the board. I checked the date on my post. It was today's.

The wound on my stomach couldn't have fully healed in a matter of hours, so the Kodansha Novels-imprint book hadn't come out of my stomach. I had simply hallucinated/fantasized/dreamed it.

"What's wrong?" Rie asked.

"Nothing," I said.

The book's mitate hadn't taken place. It had, but in a way so that it actually hadn't.

"My stomach was hurting so bad."

"Yeah, they said stomach cramps had twisted it badly. I saw the pictures, about half of it was facing the wrong way. But it was amazing, the doctor massaged it and it just healed. If he'd messed up your stomach might've ended up all wrinkly like a dust cloth."

"I'm glad that didn't happen."

"Yeah same～."

Only the 'book' had occurred in reality. The mitate of *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* from *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, and *Four* hadn't happened in reality, nor had they happened in a way that erased the fact they'd happened. And yet, I had witnessed the book's mitate with my very eyes. Even if that had been a hallucination provoked by the assumption that a Bible's mitate would happen, it had undoubtedly 'taken place' in my mind. If 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' were to write *Episode Five*, I had no idea how he would turn my internal experience into a novel. Nevertheless, I'd thought that the point in all the novels 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' had sent me up to then was that they contained 'things that didn't actually happen' written as though they 'had happened.' These events operated on a symbolic level. The start of *Genesis* with the Creation mitate. The end of *Revelation to John* with

the Second Coming of Jesus mitate. These hadn't actually occurred, but they were a straightforward way to express a simultaneous 'beginning' and 'end.' However, that symbolism had been altered. These events were no longer mere symbols, but also tools to add meaning onto actual, real events.

The nurse came back with a doctor. She was holding a newspaper. I took and opened it, not paying attention to what the doctor was saying. I stared at it. The seventh angel's seventh trumpet had sounded.

This all happened last night in Chofu.

A 13-year-old boy named Yamamoto Kenichirou was found dead in a park near his home, naked. Given the battery and electrodes found near the body and the numerous burn marks on his corpse, he appeared to have been murdered by repeated electrifications. The police was probably searching for a pederastic sadist, but this was a mitate murder disguised as a sexual assault. I could tell. The 'thunderings' had befallen Yamamoto-kun.

Watanabe Atsuhiro, another boy aged 13 as well, was crushed to death by a dresser that fell on him in his sleep. The cause for the dresser falling over was a ten-ton truck that'd crashed into the apartment building. The driver was nowhere to be found. The boy's death seemed like it would be categorized as an accident, but that was once again wrong. It was a mitate murder disguised this way. The 'earthquake' that shook Watanabe-kun's room and made the dresser fall over had been perfectly calculated and planned.

There was a huge pile of industrial ice next to a road adjacent to the Tamagawa River; yet another 13-year-old boy was found dead under that heap. His name was Morikawa Yoshiyuki. Countless bruises and broken bones were observed all over his body. The article suspected that Morikawa-kun had been run over by a car and either cooled down with ice by the culprit to interfere with the estimation of the time of death, or to protect the body from rotting due to the summer sun, but both of these were wrong. It was yet another mitate. The culprit hadn't covered Morikawa-kun's body in ice to preserve the

corpse, it was ‘great hail’ that ‘fell from the sky due to God’s wrath.’

The fact that all three of the boys were 13, that they had all died last night, and most importantly that their names were what they were, made it obvious that these were mitate murders. ‘I’ had killed ‘Yamamoto Kenichirou,’ ‘Watanabe Atsuhiro,’ and ‘Morikawa Yoshiyuki’ at the end of *Episode Two*. They were ‘Sasaki Azusa,’ ‘Hayashi Izumi,’ and ‘Hirose Neko’s’ ex boyfriends there.

I now understood what ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ was trying to convey to me with *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, and *Four*.

There was no *Episode Five*.

Everything had been written for the sake of what was happening here and now in reality.

‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ had informed me that these cases were mitate murders.

They’d informed me and only me the truth nobody, not even the police, would have suspected about the deaths of the real Yamamoto Kenichirou, Watanabe Atsuhiro, and Morikawa Yoshiyuki.

Why me? Why were these mitate even happening? That, I didn’t know.

But I knew what was going to happen next.

The seventh angel’s seventh trumpet had already been sounded. Next should be the sixth angel’s sixth trumpet being sounded.

That would happen very soon.

Four angels were standing by the great river Euphrates. God had prepared them to slay the third part of men.

4

07:35 PM. I was still in Chofu Central Hospital. Rie was headed to Inagi to pick up Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, who were in her mother’s care. I was advised to spend the night at the hospital, but I was planning on disobeying and going back home. Rie would soon arrive with Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest to pick me up.

Four fires broke out simultaneously.

One near Chofu Health Care Center, another near Futa Elementary School, one more in Daiei Studio, and the last one in our house.

These four fires started burning houses down, almost forming a square. The 110 and 119 dials were flooded and Chofu's urgent call center was in chaos. All fire trucks, patrol cars, and ambulances set off, but took a long time arriving at their destination because of the residential district's tiny roads being buried by inhabitants evacuating away from the fires and onlookers rushing to see the scene. The fire eventually spread out so much the entire south of Chofu was burning red.

I could see that happening from the hospital. I could see my house burning from my bed, from my room situated on the seventh floor.

And thus I saw the horses in the vision, and the four angels that sat on them; and out of their mouths issued fire and smoke and brimstone. By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone.

I left the hospital and headed to a public phone. There was already a long line of people waiting to make a call. I returned to the hospital, put on my jeans, slipped my shoes on, and left my room a second time. I ran past the nurses' room where emergency preparations were being made to welcome the new patients, rushed down the stairs, slipped by the doctors who were moving tables and desks in the lobby to prepare for the imminent mass delivery of patients, and rushed out of the entrance. The south sky was painted in a convulsing orange. Huge quantities of black smoke were rising in the sky. Sirens were echoing from all directions.

I ran to the door of the first house I saw past the hospital's parking lot and knocked on it. I twisted the knob without waiting for an answer. It opened. The middle-aged woman who had been on her way to answer the door saw me and was about to raise a scream. I took my sunglasses off. The scream that nearly came out of her mouth turned into a brief sigh, followed by the woman falling to the floor. I entered

the floor, my shoes still on, and opened the doors one by one. A young girl wearing a school uniform was cooking in the kitchen. She looked at me and collapsed. I turned off the stove and approached the high schooler-looking girl. She had a phone in her skirt pocket.

I called Rie's phone. After patiently waiting through the phone going *Toot, toot, toot, toot, toot* for a bit, I landed on a pre-recorded message saying, "Our phone lines are very busy at this moment," before I could get her phone to ring. I ended the call and made another one, this time to Rie's parents in Inagi. "Yes, you're speaking to Ishida," my mother-in-law answered, relaxed. "Ah, it's Tsutomu. Is Rie over there?" "Oh, Tsutomu-san? Good evening." "Is Rie over there?" "Rie? She headed back a moment ago with the babies." "When exactly?" "Good question, 15 minutes ago? Maybe even earlier." Rie must've driven there with her own car. Otherwise she wouldn't be able to move around with three babies. "Tsutomu-san, are you at the hospital? Rie said she would make a trip home before paying you a visit." "Home? You mean our house?" "I guess?" "Mother-in-law, please call Rie's phone over and over. Our house is on fire." "Eh? What?" "On fire, mother-in-law. Our house is currently burning. It's hard to get a call through right now, but please keep trying contacting her. Please tell her to head to Chofu Central Hospital once you get a hold of her." "Chofu Central Hospital, okay. I'll do that." I hung up.

I didn't know whether Rie was part of 'the third part of men' that was to be killed by God's wrath.

First, I ran to our house. It was burning. Since I barely set foot outside of it, to me it was closer to being the entire world than just the space where I slept and lived. So seeing it burn down made me feel like I was floating three centimeters above the ground. It had belonged to my father-in-law, who passed away right after breaking up with my mother-in-law. It had remained empty for many years, but when Rie gave birth to the triplets we turned it into our own nest.

And that house was now burning in a bright orange. Scorching. Searing. The roof and walls were crumbling down in parts. No glass panes remained on the windows. They'd all been blasted off by the flames. I looked at the garage next to the house. Rie's car was inside.

I didn't know whether Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were inside this burning house.

I noticed the graffiti on our gate.

It had been written with spray paint.

This is Sodom

Right, I thought. This was also a mitate of *Genesis*. After Noah's Ark and the Tower of Babel, which had been covered in *Episode Four*, came the long story of Adam's descendants Abraham and his nephew Lot. Lot resided in the city of Sodom, which was burned down alongside Gomorrah by God's ire.

Sodom was a city of sexual deviancy.

Only Seshiru, Serika, and Tsutomu knew about my past. Also 'Seiryouin Ryuusui.'

I ran inside our house. The flames enshrouded my beautiful self, but I was too beautiful for them to burn me. My beauty was too magnificent to be damaged. Even the insentient fire feared me. The walls of flame noisily writhing above, below, before, behind, to the right of, and to the left of me didn't dare approach too close; they enshrouded me from a reasonable distance. Rie's shoes were at the entrance. They had already burned and been turned into ashes. I moved to the living room. A wavering pillar of flames was connecting the floor and the ceiling. Rie's car keys were on the table. However, Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were nowhere to be seen. I looked around at the kitchen, dining room, and guest bedroom, but didn't find them. I climbed up the stairs around the shaft of flames to the second floor where the fire was burning harder. The rising heat from the fire pushed my body from below and would actually make my feet leave the ground if I wasn't careful. I stepped on the floor so as to keep my feet from levitating and checked the rooms on the second floor. However, my family wasn't in Rie's bedroom, the babies' bedroom, nor in the storage room.

Right then, I heard a dog's high-pitched bark. There couldn't be a

dog barking inside this burning house. I entered my and Rie's bedroom and looked out the glassless window. A stray dog sitting on the path leading to the house seemed to be yelping as it stared straight at me, but its cries were overshadowed by the thundering roars from the cascade of flames and didn't reach my ears. But I was certain I'd heard a dog moments ago.

I looked around at the nightly Chofu residential district. Flames were coming out of three other spots, and the houses burning in the distance were about as bright as my house.

"Woof woof! Woof!"

I heard the dog yet again. I looked for it and found it. In front of the window I was standing at, a few dozen meters in the direction of the Castle of Illusions, in a faraway dark alley cleared of any stray dogs, I found a small dog with long fur. A Cairn Terrier. The dog was barking at my nostalgic big brother, Seshiru.

He would've felt way more nostalgic if I hadn't read the novels 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' had sent me, however.

The barking Cairn Terrier was chasing after Seshiru. Seshiru was chasing after a woman running in front of him. That woman, who was carrying three babies in her arms, was Ishida Rie.

I didn't know whether I could make it in time if I started running now. I needed a backdraft for that.

I looked back to the blazing second floor and spotted a door I had yet to open behind me. It connected to the bedroom of Rie's late father and had been left intact to preserve her memories. Storm shutters were installed on its windows. I advanced through the whirling flames and reached the door. I gauged its state inside. My father-in-law's room had been burning for a while now and should soon run out of oxygen necessary to keep the fire burning. As proof, I couldn't hear the same roaring as the one from the hallway's flames from it. The window in my and Rie's bedroom was open, and some air was traveling through the hallway.

It should work.

I clenched the knob and opened the door to Rie's father's bedroom.

FPOM!

Air flooded inside the bedroom. The flames instantaneously grew in size upon being fed with oxygen and blasted me away. I rushed through the hallway into my and Rie's room, flew out of the window, and continued straight towards the Castle of Illusions' silhouette.

I flew in the air past the Cairn Terrier, past Seshiru, past Rie who was running with Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, then kicked an electrical pole and landed on the road.

Rie was surprised to see me suddenly drop from the sky.

"Tsutomu!"

"Sorry for the wait."

"Tsutomu!" she called my name a second time and jumped at my chest alongside the babies. I hugged the four of them. I then looked at Seshiru, who was standing still after being equally surprised.

"You finally got out of hiding after fearing me for so long, Seshiru," I said. The same pattern 'Seshiru' had followed in *Episode Three*. My curse had kept him away and given him the thought of, 'If he's coming for me I'd rather head out and crush him than wait in hiding.'

"Gajobun, so you were outside the house..." Seshiru said.

Seshiru must have set the house on fire without even considering the possibility of me, who'd spent 12 years straight living in a basement, being out.

"By chance, yeah. I happened to be at the hospital," I said. "I was home yesterday, the day before, and forever before that, but today of all days I happened to be out."

Seshiru clenched his teeth out of frustration and fear, and glared at me.

"Where's Serika?" I asked. "She's with you, isn't she?"

"I broke up with Mai," Seshiru said.

It had to be a lie. Seshiru and Serika would never part. But she was indeed missing.

"Is she ill?" I asked, but Seshiru stayed silent. Not hot nor cold, probably. "Or maybe she's having a baby?" I said, and this time Seshiru's body quivered. Of course. Serika getting pregnant must have

made Seshiru's fear of me peak. Seshiru was clenching a military knife in his hands.

"Seshiru, do you know 'Seiryouin Ryuusui'?" I asked. Here is how he answered:

"'Seiryouin Ryuusui' is you, asshole!"

5

"I'm not 'Seiryouin Ryuusui,'" I said.

"Liar," Seshiru said. "Who else but you could have sent me these fucking weird novels?"

"Hold on. You got sent novels as well?"

Seshiru looked at me, dubious.

I said, "I received novels from 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' too."

"What?" I kicked Seshiru's military knife out of his hands, grabbed it in the air, and thrust it at his left torso—with the hilt, the blade facing up. "Ugh, arg," Seshiru growled before falling down. He then pressed a hand against his chest and groaned, "Guh ughhh," so I told him, "This is a warning. If you approach me one more time, or I approach you one more time, I will then kill you." I cut up Seshiru's shirt with his military knife and exposed his left torso. The X mark I'd engraved was still there. The bruise from the army knife's hilt was in the middle of the scar. I told him, "I will spare you today only because I don't have a katana nearby. Plus we're in front of women and children. But next time I won't let you go. I will definitely kill you. Even if you keep running away far from me, I will one day find and kill you."

Seshiru pleaded to me while crying. "Bury the hatchet. Please, just leave us alone. I beg of you."

I ignored him, stood up, and faced Rie.

She was still afraid.

The Cairn Terrier that had been chasing Seshiru wasn't around.

That dog might have been another hallucination, like the Kodansha Novels-imprint *Tsukumojuuku* written by Seiryouin Ryuusui. If it was the same Cairn Terrier as the one in *Episode Three*, its name should be 'Moppy.' I didn't know why 'Moppy' had informed me of

Rie's location.

That could wait, I thought. I spoke to Rie:

"Let's get away from here for the moment. Let's go to your parents' house."

Rie then said, "Wait. Who's this man?" while carrying the three babies in her hands. Desperate mothers were strong. She would never drop the kids. I let go of the military knife, took Tolerant and Sincere from her, and answered,

"Inugami Yasha. A great detective."

"So, Seshiru-san, right? Your big brother."

Rie handed me Honest as well before I could answer, then headed towards Seshiru, who was crouching on the side of the road, crying. "You fucking deviant," she said and kicked his face. Rie's sneaker gouged out the skin under Seshiru's ear. "Ksh," Seshiru grunted as his head twisted back. His cheek was getting redder and redder. "Fucking scum," Rie then stomped on the back of his head. "Gh, uuugh, *sniff*," Seshiru groaned and cried. He was sniffing his snot with his head on the road. Rie then yelled, "Die!" and dropped her heel on the back of his head over and over. I stopped her.

"Stop it."

"But Tsutomu, this asshole burned my dad's house!"

Rie stepped on Seshiru's head one more time.

"Ughh, gh..."

"Stop that, Rie."

"Nah, this is what he deserves. I'll seriously kill this guy."

Seshiru then spoke from under Rie's foot:

"Yeah, it must be really sad to see your dad's precious, nostalgic fuckhouse burn down, huh, Rie."

Rie looked down at Seshiru. Her face was pale.

Seshiru continued.

"It was all written in the *Episode Four* I received, you know? Your mom found out about your father-daughter incest, moved away, divorced, but you guys didn't learn, kept fucking, and eventually made babies, only for the dad to kill himself. Now in deep shit, Rie, you found Gajobun and pushed all your shit and you shitty kids onto

him, and they lived happily ever after. But I come in and shatter that happiness. End of *Episode Four*. Huh? Hold on, but the guy who sent it to me and got me to come up with a plan is that asshole! Hey, Gajobun, ain't that right?!"

First, I answered, "I've already told you that 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' sent novels to me too." I then asked him, "Seshiru, do you have that novel on you right now?"

"Fuck off! Die!"

I couldn't get through him.

I took my shoes off, the three children still in my arms. "Rie, fall back for a second," I said, waited for her to take her foot off Seshiru's head, and kicked the military knife I'd dropped on the ground earlier. It stabbed Seshiru's neck. His blabbering came to a rest. I approached Seshiru, gave Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest back to Rie, crouched, and pulled the knife out of Seshiru's neck before immediately stabbing his left torso.

I knew. Seshiru had come to kill me, but also to die.

His constant fear of my curse must've played a part in exhausting his mind, but a major part was probably that he was afraid of the children growing inside Serika's belly. That's why he'd gone out of his way to provoke me.

Seshiru was in the same boat when it came to giving birth to incestuous children. Also when it came to dying in fear of said children.

I pulled the knife out of Seshiru's chest, wiped the blood on his shirt, stood up, put the knife away in my jeans' pocket, then said to Rie, "Let's go now." I extended a hand to her. "Let's go back to mother-in-law's place."

Rie followed after me. Firefighters finally started spraying water onto our burning house that had belonged to her father, but Rie never looked back.

She said, "All of what this guy said is false."

"Yeah," I said.

It was merely a mitate of Lot's daughters making children through an incestuous relationship. It wasn't real.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were my children.

Not anyone else's.

6

We were walking at night. We could hear flames noisily consuming houses in the distance. They sounded so distant despite the fireworks going *Fizz pop fizz* high in the air sounding extremely close.

The fire coloring the sky red informed us that clouds weren't merely a pattern coloring the sky but that they were indeed floating above us, and not as high as one might initially think. They were close enough that the light emanating from a house fire reached them.

The numerous sirens going back and forth, sometimes towards us, sometimes away from us, informed us that there were many roads on earth extending far into the horizon.

I was carrying Tolerant and Honest while Rie was carrying Sincere. All three of them were sleeping in our arms. They were good sleepers. Sleeping kids grow well, but Rie often complained that ours slept too much. Nevertheless, these peaceful babies who keep on sleeping to their hearts' content secretly comforted me. It was proof that they trusted Rie and me. That they were at peace with us. That we were doing a good job at protecting them so far.

Honest's pointy open mouth was drooling. I turned back to Rie and asked her, "Could you wipe Honest's mouth with a handkerchief?" Rie raised her downcasted face, looked at me, smiled, then looked at Honest's face and giggled. She then took out a handkerchief from her jeans' pocket and promptly wiped his mouth. Honest closed his mouth, half-opened his eyes, and made an upset face, so I anticipated him crying, but in the end he silently went back to sleep. His mouth was still pointy and open, as usual. He would start drooling again soon, I bet.

Rie put away the handkerchief in her pocket, then extended that free hand to me and grabbed the hem of my T-shirt.

The five of us kept walking close to each other. We reached the Tamagawa River's banks. There weren't any lights near the river so the whole area was pitch black. The only help we had to distinguish

between the river and the bank was the light coming from the city past the other bank. If one were to look at Chofu from Inagi, they might get a better idea of the river's shape with the red sky reflecting on it.

Chofu's flames were fading in the distance behind us and the sirens only faintly reached us; I could finally hear the babies breathing in my arms. I could hear the cicadas who'd forgotten to stop chanting at night. The frogs too. Enticed by the silence of the Tamagawa River's darkness separating the two cities, I unconsciously stopped walking. I could still pick up the scent of grass that had been warmed up by the sun during the day.

"I love you, Tsutomu," Rie said from behind. "Thank you for saving me."

She buried her face in my back.

The hand that had been grabbing my T-shirt wrapped around my chest.

"I was really scared. I can't thank you enough."

Seeing me stay silent for a while, she started stroking my chest through my T-shirt.

Rie was about to say something.

And stopped herself.

She was about to say something again.

But didn't.

I knew perfectly well.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest really were my and Rie's children. The very children we had conceived two years and eight months ago, and Rie had given birth to a year and eleven months ago. Rie's father passed away four years ago when she was a student at a women's university in Nagoya where she lived alone. She returned to Nagoya after his funeral, graduated a few months later, started working at a design office, still in Nagoya, and met me shortly after.

There was no time for Rie's father to butt in between the two of us, even less when it came to our children.

But when her parents started living apart 12 years ago, Rie had chosen to live with her father. She barely met her mother because of

it, but she was getting along really well with her father. So much that she hadn't gotten herself a boyfriend from middle school to university. "I mean, I just didn't really need one," she'd told me. "I was having more fun with my dad, his jokes were funny and also I would feel bad leaving him alone."

Rie loved her dad a lot. Needless to say, that love was in no way a romantic one that would normally develop between a man and a woman. But it was possible to mistake it for one—quite likely, actually. So likely that Rie herself was doubting whether she hadn't mistaken it for one, whether she hadn't reached the wrong conclusion.

Rie was doubting. She was thinking about possibilities. She was fearing the existence of these possibilities.

I considered denying their existence. 'That didn't happen, it never had a chance of happening. You might think that something could have happened, but it hasn't, it means that it never had a chance of happening.' I considered telling her that.

But I didn't.

I'd told her that many times already.

Or no, I hadn't.

I had only said that inside 'Seiryouin Ryuusui's' novels. I hadn't actually said it yet. But Rie had read those novels many times over. If I brought up the topic of possibilities to her, she would think I was rambling on the same things again too.

Even though I hadn't actually said anything. Even though we'd merely read it inside a novel.

I looked back without saying anything and, the three babies in-between us, gently and peacefully kissed Rie's lips. I licked her upper lip, bit her lower lip, and entangled our tongues. We felt each other's front teeth with our tongues.

"Tsutomu, don't let the police arrest you," Rie said.

"I won't," I replied.

"You're so cool. Hey, can you take your sunglasses off? I should be fine in the dark."

I removed my sunglasses.

Rie kissed my eyeball on the dark bank of the Tamagawa River.

“My poor Tsukumojuuku”, she said.

We then crossed a bridge, entered Inagi on the other bank, finally boarded a taxi, and headed to Rie’s mother’s house. After putting Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest to sleep in a bed, I returned to the entrance. Rie joined me.

“You’re returning to Chofu, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I have to take care of a few things.”

“Be careful.”

“Rie...I’m sorry for your dad’s house.”

“Be careful out there, Tsutomu. I’ll stay awake and wait for you.”

“I’ll try to come back as soon as possible. Just go to sleep.”

“Maybe I should come with you...”

“I don’t want Tolerant, Sincere, or Honest waking up at night alone, stay.”

“Suuure～.”

“I love you too, Rie.”

Hearing that, Rie’s face suddenly got teary.

“You finally said it... Geez,” she said and wailed.

Waaah.

I grabbed a taxi and headed back to the red Chofu. The fire was still burning the city at nearly the same pace. But such a large-scale fire shouldn’t spread out much. Someone was actively spreading it.

When Seshiru set fire to my house, three other fires had broken at the same time in other locations. There were three ‘angels’ other than him.

I returned near my house. It was still burning. There was a crowd of police officers in front of it, creating a barrier around the area with ropes. They’d found Seshiru’s corpse. I passed by these officers and checked both sides of the road. I was searching for the car Seshiru must’ve used to come here. He’d been planning on killing me, but I wasn’t sure whether he had any genuine intention of killing Rie and

our children. It was more likely that he planned on taking them hostage in case he'd failed to get me. I couldn't imagine him living in our neighborhood, so he had to have come by car.

Found it.

And I hadn't only found Seshiru's car. On the passenger seat of his red Alfa Romeo was Serika and her swollen belly.

Serika was sleeping, her head resting on the window. Traces of tears flowing down her cheeks were still visible. She must've fallen asleep while crying. She knew that Seshiru had died. That I'd killed him. And that I'd stabbed his left torso as prophesied by my curse.

I looked at Serika's big belly.

Now that I'd killed Seshiru according to the curse, if I were to wake Serika up I might have to slice her belly, take her children out of it, take it somewhere else, and devour it there. I wasn't sure.

Her stomach was really big, she should've been nearing the end of pregnancy. And with Seshiru dead, this might've been my only chance to slice her belly open and devour the children inside. If I let her go, my malediction would lose all meaning.

That would be fine.

My curse's main effect came from my words to begin with. I didn't actually need to do anything. I didn't need to kill Seshiru. I'd killed him because of the horrendous things he'd said to Rie. My precious Seshiru. I didn't wish to kill him. I longed for him.

I would leave Serika and the child inside her alone—I thought upon seeing Serika sleep inside the red Alfa Romeo.

I found what I'd been searching for on the backseat.

Thick bundles of paper held together by double clips on the upper left. Four of these were casually piled up on one of the seats.

I looked at the cover of the topmost bundle.

Episode One - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Jackpot.

I gently opened the door on the back. I reached out for the novels. Serika woke up then.

“Gajobun.”

I hadn’t seen her in three years.

“Hey.”

“Please forgive Seshiru.”

“I’ve already killed him,” I said.

She nodded. “I know.”

“…”

“Even so, I still hope you can forgive him.”

“Forgiveness doesn’t matter when it comes to dead people.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Gajobun.”

“…”

“Sometimes you need to resolve a problem that’s been taken care of one more time.”

“…I don’t get what you’re getting at.”

“Do you know who’s the father?”

“Isn’t it Seshiru?”

“No. It’s you, Gajobun.”

“Eh?”

“I’m saying you laid these children inside my stomach. What will you do? They’re triplets by the way.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just look at this enormous belly. Doesn’t it remind you of something? Of Rie’s?”

I pulled my hands away from the backseat and felt Serika’s belly.

I felt her warm stomach through her dress.

“They’re healthy triplets. I’m not sure what to name them. Would Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest be fine? I like these three names too, you know.”

The palm of my hand on Serika’s belly wasn’t touching children. There was something hard. Square. Flat. Straight.

A book.

I took out Seshiru’s knife from my jeans’ back pocket and pierced

Serika's belly. I swiped it to the side. Her belly split open, and three books slipped their way out of it. Three books carefully wrapped in vinyl, with the Kodansha Novels imprint.

Tsukumojuuku - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Katou Seshiru - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Suzuki Tsutomu - Seiryouin Ryuusui

I was hallucinating yet again.

To wake up from it, instead of planting the knife I'd taken out inside Serika's huge belly, I removed my sunglasses and peeled off my own face. I made incisions on my temples then slid the knife in-between my flesh and my skull and shaved my whole face at the root. I spread out the strip of flesh and slid the knife further and further in until a big, single-layered steak made out of my cheeks, my forehead, my nose, and my jaw fell off. My warm face was resting on my lap. Losing the skin of my eyelids, nose, and cheeks wasn't that disturbing, but I found myself especially weirded out by my lack of lips. I could see without my eyelids and I could smell things without my nose, but I just couldn't articulate well without my lips.

"Serika."

I could speak.

"Look at ne."

"Not in a million years."

"It's okay. You on't haint anyore."

Serika turned to the back of the car.

"Oh, you're right, I seem fine."

"Serika, hor the kids' nanes, just don't do Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Clease, anything hut that."

Pfft, Serika laughed.

"What are you saying, of course. That was a joke. Sorry for that, Gajobun. I won't give birth to children. Do you know what's inside my

belly?”

“…”

“These aren’t children. They are nothing. My belly is simply filled with my dreams. For the past nine months I’ve been having a false pregnancy. Aren’t people’s imagination something? They can even get pregnant if they believe in it.”

“…Whose children did you want to gich hirth to?”

“…At first I considered birthing Seshiru’s children, you see. But both of us were scared at the idea and vetoed it, so next I came to want your children, Gajobun. But isn’t it kinda awkward to want your children when I’m with Seshiru? That’s why I yearned for both of your children. Both at the same time. Aren’t I greedy? But don’t worry, I’ve fused you with Seshiru so they’re not exactly yours. I mean, they’re not real children to begin with. They’re just water in the shape of children. Once I reach the final month I’ll probably get birth pains and all of the water will evacuate. And that’s where it ends. But I’m lonely, so I’ll find another fictional man to fall in love with and bear his fictional children, I’m sure. That’s how I’ll nurture my love. I could even give Seshiru children if I felt like it. Not saying I will, though.”

“Can I take these nohels?” I asked, picking up the bundles on the backseat.

“Sure,” she said. “Say, Gajobun, are things going well with your wife?”

“Yeah.”

“Are your kids cute?”

“They are.”

“Ah~, must be nice,” Serika said, facing ahead again. “I wish I could make myself a family and everything just by the power of my imagination…”

“Serika, the hire is shreading hast, you shouldn’t stay here too long,” I said and opened the rear door.

“Okay, thanks,” Serika said and looked back. “Hey, Gajobun. I’m sorry.”

“It’s hine.”

“Nah. I’m not talking about that lie from earlier.”

"..."

"I'm sorry for that too, but I mean I'm sorry for that last day in Fukui. I really am. I never thought you would enter that room at the time, okay? Plus I didn't want things to go like that with Seshiru..."

"Don't nention it anyore, it's hine. I don't nind it."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Thank god. That's the one thing I've been dragging with me this whole time. We've only been causing you problems, Gajobun. Sorry for making you go through all of that. I'm sorry for everything."

"It's hine. You don't need to ahologize."

"Really?"

"Serika, I'll rehove that curse. I won't steal your children, nor will I dehour then. I want you to nake cute children. I want you and your children to he happy."

"I'm good, I don't need children," Serika then said. "I am Abraham and offer my children to God. And the Lord blesses me for it. He grants me wealth, multiplies my seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is upon the seashore, blesses them to possess the gate of my enemies, and to become rulers of all the nations of the earth."

I got out of the car while Serika moved to the driver seat without going outside before departing alongside her enormous belly. I was standing alone on the road, my face and sunglasses in my left hand, and the *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, and *Four* Seshiru and Serika had received in my right hand. I waited for the red Alfa Romeo to disappear from my eyesight, stuck my peeled-off face back onto my skull, then headed for Daiei Studio with the bundles of paper in hand.

I entered Daiei Studio's warehouse, which had been the initial source of the fire. It was still on fire and being actively put out, but flames dared not approach me. I'd penetrated the flames without any set objectives, but I quickly found the 'angel's' identity inside that

building.

I also found the ‘angels’ responsible for the fires near Chofu Health Care Center and near Futa Elementary School on the relevant scenes, one by one.

I then sewed my face back before calling the police.

I started my explanation.

“The four simultaneous fires that broke out in different locations of Chofu were all the deeds of the fugitive Katou Seshiru under the name ‘Inugami Yasha.’ ‘Inugami Yasha’ set my house on fire to murder me—his little brother. However, in case he might get arrested, he devised a scheme to make it harder to assemble a case for him by creating an impossible situation. As you know perfectly well, when one is arrested guilty as charged, the procedure requires for there to be a reconstitution of the crime put into text form. With an impossible situation, the police and the prosecutors might fail to do that, which would weaken their case and, with some luck, might result in the charges being dropped due to a lack of evidence—that’s how ‘Inugami Yasha’ perceived his hopes. However, the impossible situation he’d prepared was as shallow and simple as his expectation of what would happen after his arrest. If three other fires broke out at the same time in other locations, the police would need to prove how he’d set those off. Then he might be able to make up three other fictitious arsonists and maybe even pass off his crime from theirs. That’s how the man arrogantly taking up the title of great detective, ‘Inugami Yasha,’ thought.”

I then presented everyone with a vinyl bag containing seven arrows. All of them were charred black.

“Three of these arrows came from the suspected sources of the three fires that weren’t my home. The rest were found burned to a crisp in other places of Chofu. ‘Inugami Yasha’ had set these wooden arrows on fire and shot them in random directions from my house. He then waited for a bit, and saw black smoke rise in the sky. At two, then three spots. So he hurried to set my house on fire. After all, if he let too much time pass between the other fires and this one, the

situation wouldn't be impossible. 'Inugami Yasha' was in a hurry. And due to his haste, he failed to notice that I was out of the house by chance. Nor did he notice me running from the hospital to my house..."

I got into a fight with 'Inugami Yasha' at the crime scene and killed him, which was judged to be righteous self-defense. *It was unfortunate,* I said, putting a close to it. I also told them I didn't know the meaning behind the 'This is Sodom' graffiti.

I then headed back to Rie's home in Inagi. She was sleeping with the triplets. My mother-in-law was awake, waiting for me, and prepared me some tea. I spread out the three letters I'd found at the fire scenes in Chofu while drinking it. They had each been wrapped in aluminum foil and attached to arrows.

"My, Tsutomu-san, what are these," my mother-in-law enquired.

"Just someone playing a prank," I said.

"But, Tsutomu-san, these have your name on it?" she said, taking the letters from my hands.

The culprit of the Castle of Illusions' serial murders is...the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku

The culprit of the Castle of Illusions' serial murders is...Seiryouin Ryuusui

The culprit of the Castle of Illusions' serial murders is...Daibakushou Curry

"I'm not a great detective or anything of the sort," I said and took the letters back from her hands. "Nor am I Tsukumojuuku. My name is Ishida Tsutomu."

I ripped the letters, curled them into a ball, and threw them in the bin.

In reality, Seshiru had only burned my house. But right when he set fire to my house, something fortuitous happened.

Someone inside the Castle of Illusions had deduced the culprit's name. They tried to inform the outside world by releasing an arrow they'd attached a letter to through the gap they usually used to let their screams, yells, and cries reach us. There must have been a reason they couldn't use their voice for it. The arrow was on fire so that people would be able to clearly locate it in the night. However, the culprit quickly realized their intent, prepared other letters, and sent out more blazing arrows. With the arrows all setting off fires where they'd landed, I ended up being the only one to find any.

I'd pinned all of the fires onto Seshiru to cover up the letters, but, well, he was already dead. He shouldn't mind too much.

About when I was about to finish my cup of tea, my mother-in-law's home phone rang. "Who could it be at this hour?" she said, picking it up. She then handed the receiver to me. "Tsutomu-san, it's from the real Tsutomu-san."

I had never informed Tsutomu of my whereabouts.

"...Hello?"

"Ah, onii-chan? It's me, Tsutomu."

It was him. My dear Tsutomu.

"Hi, how did you know where I was?"

"Heh heh heh heh. I'm a great detective too, you see."

"Great detective?"

"The Great Detective Daibakushou Curry. Best regards."

'Daibakushou Curry' was indeed the name Tsutomu used in *Episode Two*.

"Tsutomu."

"What?"

"Do you know 'Seiryouin Ryuusui'?"

"Yeah, of course. That's me."

“Could ya turn the TV on? To Daikeio TV,” Tsutomu requested, so I pressed the remote accordingly. It was already dawn and news programs had started broadcasting. They had images of fires. But that didn’t look like Chofu’s four simultaneous fires.

The Katou house in West Akatsuki was burning.

My, Seshiru, and Serika’s home was wrapped in flames, exhaling smoke, and on the verge of collapsing.

Something had been written with spray painting on the gate.

This is Gomorrah

“You did this, onii-chan, didn’t ya?” Tsutomu said.

“...Tsutomu. What meaning is there to this?”

“I’ll definitely expose your crimes, onii-chan. I’m still not sure what’s going on, but I’ll expose all you’ve been doing.”

“I haven’t done anything. More importantly, Tsutomu, why have you been sending Seshiru and me these bizarre novels?”

“Huh? I haven’t done any of that. What are you saying?”

“I mean, aren’t you ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’?”

“I’m not sure what you’re on about, but Seiryouin Ryuusui’s the name you gave to me. What, don’t tell me you forgot already.”

“...”

“Whatever. I gotta go back to everyone, see you. Don’t forget, I’ll come to arrest you. Bye!”

The call ended.

The Katou house burned to the ground, but no one was hurt. Heisuke-san, Shiono-san, Takashi-san, Katou-kun, and Tsutomu were all declared unhurt.

Thank god.

7

I would never give Tsutomu a weird name like ‘Seiryouin

Ryuusui.'

Which meant that someone nearby Tsutomu who resembled me was usurping my name. The same went for inside the Castle of Illusions near my house.

The 'me' inside the Castle of Illusions in *Episode Four* called himself a great detective and also was the culprit. Two other people had been called out as being the culprit. 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' and 'Suzuki Tsutomu.' If what Tsutomu had briefly said was true, then he was using the name 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' but wasn't the same one as the 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' sending me those novels. Kodansha Novels also had an author called 'Seiryouin Ryuusui', but when I called Kodansha to check with them after receiving *Episode One*, his editor at Kodansha Novels, Oota Katsushi, told me that, "Ryuusui-san has been busy finalizing the manuscripts to *The Saimon Family Case* and *Carnival* as well as working on new projects for the past while, so I don't think he would write other things in addition to that. Of course, if he sets his mind to it, he would be able to write anything, he would find the time to write no matter how busy he is. Still, I've asked Ryuusui-san personally: *Ryuusui-sa~n, please focus on this manuscript, gee*—hah hah hah. No seriously, Ryuusui-san isn't the kind of person to lie to or betray his editor. I can't imagine him writing prank novels and sending them to random people without telling me." So maybe there were three 'Seiryouin Ryuusui.' Maybe there were four of them. Five of them. One of them being inside the Castle of Illusions, where someone accused them of being the murders' culprit.

And there was another 'Suzuki Tsutomu' in the real Castle of Illusions. Tsutomu my little brother, 'Tsutomu' the name I was using, and the 'Tsutomu' accused by the letter attached to the blazing arrow shot out of the Castle of Illusions.

I might need to find a way in the Castle of Illusions as Rie had requested of me, I thought. I might have a role to play there, I thought. The next *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* mitate might occur inside the castle after I'd snuck inside, I thought.

I didn't know why the Bible's mitate were happening. I laid down next to Rie, thinking, *I don't know*. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were

sleeping in-between Rie and I. The names ‘Tolerant,’ ‘Sincere,’ and ‘Honest’ were overlapping as well. My old nicknames, ‘my children’ within ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels, my actual triplets, and Serika who’d asked tonight—though not with any seriousness—whether she could name ‘her children’ that.

I didn’t know why names were overlapping in such complex ways. I didn’t know many names, but other people should know more than me. God should know all of the names. Then why were these few names jumbled together in such a cramped place?

I fell asleep thinking about these many things I didn’t know, and woke up to the end of the world where I would understand the meaning behind the ‘mitate’ and ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels.

Everything had been to inform me of the calamities brought about by the fifth angel’s fifth trumpet.

And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth, and it was commanded to them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, nor any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads. And to them it was given that they should not kill them, but that they should be tormented for five months: and their torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man. And in those days shall men seek death, and death shall flee from them. And the shapes of the locusts were like unto horses; and their faces were as the faces of men and they had a king over them, the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon.

‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ was informing me of the arrival of this *star*

through *Episode One*, *Episode Two*, *Episode Three*, and *Episode Four*. Why had he made me wonder why those Bible mitate that had only been taking place inside the fictitious novels were starting to take place in reality?

That was so that, when the star fell, in that one moment when the world ended, I would make the correct decision.

That meteor which would bring along the deep abyss harboring Apollyon was headed for Earth at one third the speed of light. The first to notice that meteor was an employee at Chofu's Hosaka Observatory. When they calculated its position, speed, and direction before concluding that it would crash straight into Earth, there was already a mere six and a half hours left.

I woke up in my mother-in-law's place in Inagi and was informed of the remaining six hours by the TV when I was eating breakfast alongside Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. The newscaster trembled as they spoke, "This meteor headed for Earth is seven times bigger than the Moon and will shatter Earth in an instant when it hits it at the speed of about 100,000 kilometers per second. What might be a silver lining in all this is that we apparently won't have the time to feel any pain when the world ends. Specialists all around the world are still running various calculations, but currently it is predicted that six hours from now the world will turn blank and everything will be destroyed in under a second."

'Seiryouin Ryuusui' might be in possession of a better, more precise telescope with which they'd detected this star's approach over three years ago. They might have gotten their hands on some evidence that led them to expect it. And, although I didn't know the reason, they might have been trying to inform Seshiru and I about it. In a really roundabout way. But that must have been the only way they had to do it. There had to be something that could only be conveyed that way.

Maybe 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' wasn't just a play on 'Seiryouin

Ryousui' and 'Seiryou in Ryuusui,' but also on 'Ryuusei in Suiryou' through an anagram, with 'in' actually being the contracted form of 'ing' and 'suiryou' the noun form of 'to guess' or 'to infer,' which would give us 'guess' 'in'' 'ryuusei' = guessin' a meteor.

'Seiryouin Ryuusui' might have made me read *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, and *Four* to train my imagination.

Episode Two had a 'meteorite falling on Earth' towards the end. The fact that it ultimately wasn't used in 'my' deduction as a 'mitate' might be because the author knew that it would happen later—now—in the real world. And no meteorites fell in *Episode Two*. It was a mere mitate.

There must be more these episodes wanted to convey to me.

Why did the Bible mitate end halfway through? That's because this wasn't the end, there was still more to come.

We wouldn't die.

This wasn't 'the end of the world.'

'The end of the world' was discussed in *Episode Three* as well. If we turn the logic from that episode on its head, 'the end' was 'Owari,' 'Nagoya,' and therefore 'harmony.' It hinted at a peaceful world existing beyond what appeared to be 'the end.'

I recalled the contents of the four episodes. The Bible mitate and the overlap of names. Other than that, the dead and the living being switched. People dead in one story are alive in others, and people alive in one story die in the next one. What did this indicate? That one's life and death wasn't immutable, of course. Death is never an inflexible death, and life is never an inflexible life. If the world changes, so will death and life. The world changing basically means the events happening inside it change.

'I' had repeated that 'All possibilities can be categorized into things that have happened, things that won't happen, and things that are to happen, but only things that have happened do happen. What doesn't happen just doesn't, and what is to happen still doesn't happen.' However, I knew that in this reality things could happen yet end up as though they had never happened. The Kodansha Novels book that came out of my belly. The Kodansha Novels books that

came out of Serika's belly.

Things that happen can also not happen.

And Kodansha Novels!

As mentioned in *Episode Two*, 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' was 'evolving' from Noveller to Personovels/Personotenough, Novella Can't Tell Ya, Canno-t-vel, and I'm Not Tellin' You A Wor(l)d Anymore. That sequence not only shows that 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' is the 'noveller' = God, but also that God is slowly giving up on narrating—with Personotenough, Novella Can't Tell Ya, Canno-t-vel, and I'm Not Tellin' You A Wor(l)d Anymore. In other words, it shows that there are things that even the omniscient and omnipotent God doesn't know!

There are things that God doesn't know.

Things that don't happen can happen.

The world wouldn't end.

A 'peaceful world' existed beyond what appeared to be 'the end of the world.'

And I, who received novels = words from 'Seiryouin Ryuusui,' would definitely reach that world!

Kodansha Novels. 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' (= God)'s editor was 'Oota Katsushi.' The entity in charge of God, the entity editing God's words.

The name 'Oota Katsushi' came up in *Episode One* as well. Just once. In a thread from the internet message board Voice of Heaven. 'Farewell—Mourning Oota Katsushi.' In *Episode Two*, Oota Katsushi became a victim of Armageddon and died. In *Episode Three*, he was alive and trapped inside the Castle of Illusions. In *Episode Four*, while still trapped inside the Castle of Illusions, he grumbled about the publication of 'Seiryouin Ryuusui's' Kodansa Novels book *The Saimon Family Case* running late. But *The Saimon Family Case* was on 'my' house's table in *Episode Three*.

I was being guided.

Time was progressing backwards.

'My' time was flowing normally throughout *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, and *Four*. However, 'Oota Katsushi's' time alone was going back in time, from *Episode Four* to *Episode Three*, *Episode Two*, and *Episode*

One. 'Seiryouin Ryuusui's' Kodansha Novels, too, went back in time in-between *Episode Four* and *Episode Three*.

Time was inverted.

Right. That's why, despite *Genesis* being turned into mitate in order, the mitate of *Revelation to John*, which portrayed the apocalypse, started from the end.

Time gets inverted at the end of the world.

How does it get flipped?

How do timeslips occur?

Here is how the general theory goes:

Time isn't flowing straight, it is twisted and may overlap. The overlapping parts have tunnels called 'wormholes,' and one can slip through time if they can find a way to pass through one.

Tunnels. Holes. Bottomless abyss.

I knew.

The 'bottomless abyss' that would be opened by the star falling on us was the wormhole.

It was going at one third the speed of light. It had seven times the gravitational pull of the Moon. That meteor was twisting time and space in complex ways. It was forming a rip in time and space that would lead to a wormhole.

I consulted Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, and my mother-in-law about it. About the fact that we needed to pass through this wormhole and move on to the next world.

My mother-in-law asked how we would do it.

I answered that I would know when the time came.

Rie seemed relieved hearing my suggestion, she started playing with the triplets who were smiling brightly. "I'll get ready to go to the next world after playing for a bit," she said. "We don't know what world we're going to, do we?" "It will probably be in the past," I said. That's what 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' (= God) had said. But the current God seemed to be unable to tell everything—unable to tell, unwilling to tell, resolute to not tell anything—so maybe this was one of the things even God didn't know and I wouldn't be able to tell either.

My mother-in-law said she would dry the laundry and headed to

the second floor. I helped her. We both came out on the balcony.

“With such fine weather six hours should be enough to dry them,” she said. “It would feel plain bad to leave dirty laundry behind at the end of the world.”

“This isn’t the end of the world,” I said.

She shrugged her shoulders.

If one could draw a parallel between hanging out laundry and listing one’s options, then I could see multiple possibilities spreading out before my eyes.

One of these would happen.

Things that happen happen. They happen in a way so that they don’t happen. Things that happen don’t happen.

‘The end of the world’ wouldn’t happen.

I could see Chofu’s silhouette in the distance from here. Smoke was rising from it. Sirens were ringing. Even when faced with the last hours of ‘the end of the world,’ there were still people putting out the fires. There were people doing their laundry. There were people playing with children. There were people in distress over Kodansha Novels books.

As though ‘the end of the world’ really wouldn’t occur.

That was fine.

That was the right behavior.

‘The end of the world’ wouldn’t come around. There was still more to the mitate of *Genesis* and *Revelation to John*. God still had more to say. He still had more to fail to tell in its entirety, to fail to tell, to not tell, and to definitely not tell.

I only needed to wait for it.

My mother-in-law, Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest’s laundry was hanging before my eyes. ‘Clothes’ were homonymous to ‘blessings’ in Japanese.

I left the balcony while warming myself with the love my heart had produced, and returned to Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.

The employee from Chofu’s Hosaka Observatory who first discovered the meteor that would destroy Earth, Yashiro Umi, gave it

the name ‘Moppy.’ It was apparently the name of her Cairn Terrier.

Moppy was drawing close when the sun started to set over Chofu. Five minutes before the crash, the sky suddenly turned bright white, and a black hole appeared inside that whiteness.

I looked inside the hole and saw a blue sky spread beyond it.

Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, my mother-in-law, and I held hands together and got sucked into that blue sky.

When the heaven and the earth, all directions got flipped, I heard my mother-in-law’s voice as she was clinging onto me, shaking.

“Oh, such misery, such misery. Oh, woe, woe, woe. So many woes are yet to come during our lives. Angels are to sound their trumpets and bring about woes. Oh, such misery.”

I laughed.

“Stop it, mother-in-law.”

But these words were a certificate to me. Since the eagle had spoken, the fourth angel’s fourth trumpet would definitely be sounded.

That eagle, which appeared after the first four angels had sounded their trumpets, lamented over the three calamities the fifth, sixth, and seventh angels’ trumpets would cause. These three calamities had already happened in this world. What had happened in this world would happen in the other world. What hadn’t happened in the other world would now happen here.

Time was reversed. But the world still continued.

Even if calamities brought about by angels were to take place in the future, it shouldn’t be as bad as the end of the world still.

Now that ‘the end of the world’ had happened in a way so that it hadn’t happened, what would happen next in my world?

I hugged Rie, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, and my mother-in-law. I

had a family. I had things I wanted. No matter what calamity may befall us, I would protect this family.

Even if ‘the end of the world’ were to occur a second time, I would escape it once again.

Episode 4
9+9+9
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

Moppy's walking itinerary starts by taking the alley down south behind the house, passing behind the Keio-Tamagawa Station then next to the Keiokaku Velodrome until the banks of the Tamagawa River, followed by either, if you're in a good mood, walking east along the banks up till around Tamagawa Green Space Park before turning around and coming home, or, if you can't be arsed that day, letting Moppy play around on the river terrace before walking straight home. Umi headed out with Moppy saying she would take the slow itinerary since the weather was so great, so I had about two hours until they came home. I looked at the clock in the living room. 4 PM. I decided to resolve the serial killing case that's been happening in Chofu while they were out on their walk.

Because all the victims were young women highly-regarded for their looks, the media called it the Chofu Serial Beauty Dismemberment Case. Umi had a friend working as a model for a magazine, but that girl fell victim to the case two days ago which had caused Umi's mood to hit rock bottom for the past 48 hours, and although I already wanted to be useful to Umi in any capacity I could, seeing the families of the previous victims in the 15-minute news corner this morning offer a ten-million-yen reward for resolving the case *did* play a big part in motivating me. Not only was I not working, the offspring we had last fall ended up being triplets which cost three times more money, and on top of that I was making my mother-in-law take care of them most of the time, so I figured that getting my hands on ten million yen might be a good way to save face at least a little and turn me into a somewhat honorable person. Well, part of it was also me wanting to get one back on my mother-in-law who kept telling me, "You can be smart and overly beautiful all you want, you can't make money by just making people faint."

I told my mother-in-law, who was soothing the triplets in 'Granny's Room,' "Mother-in-law, I'm heading out for a bit. I've prepared a tuna sauté, stir-fried potatoes, and pork just in case." "Oh, but you will come home before dinner, won't you, Tsutomu-san?"

“That’s the plan.” “Are you buying groceries?” “No, just taking a walk.” “Be careful on your way and have a good time. Oh, Tsutomu-san.” “Yes?” “Can you stop by a bookstore on your way back and buy me some magazines? I think *Gunzo*, *Shincho*, *Subaru*, and *Bungakukai* should be out already.” “Sure. I’ll be on my way, then.” “Have a nice time.” Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, waving their plump arms around with a big smile on their faces, looked like huge insects who found themselves stuck on their backs and simply couldn’t find a way out of it.

I put my jacket and shoes on, then left the house. About 70 percent of the cherry blossoms had fallen; light-pink petals caressed the concrete paths while being pushed along by the wind.

The people trapped inside the Castle of Illusions wouldn’t have gotten the chance to enjoy this year’s cherry blossoms. They were something one ought to admire from up close. Someone looking at the tiny cherry blossoms from the castle’s sole window situated in one of the seven spires, the highest one at that, wouldn’t be able to *truly* enjoy them no matter how hard they tried.

Being unable to enjoy the last cherries that would blossom during one’s lifetime... If I were in their shoes, I would be bitter. I loved cherry blossoms. Especially when they just start falling. Sakura mochi was delicious. Umi loved it too, so I might buy some in addition to my mother-in-law’s magazines on the way home. I wasn’t sure when exactly I would receive the ten million, but I at least had enough money for sakura mochi on me.

I would solve the Castle of Illusions Case if they just put out a reward for it, I thought. One might eventually appear if I waited some more on it. I’d heard that nearly 30 people had died in there already, which meant lots of people losing a loved one, and a higher reward when the time came. I expected quite a bit from that case.

Now, who should I have the culprit be?

Eh, Seshiru should do the trick again.

Not only was he missing, he was already a murderer, it shouldn’t be too complicated to pass him off as the culprit.

Him and Serika had decapitated Junko-san and hid her head; that

should be a perfect finishing touch of justification considering some of the victims' heads had been cut off and taken away. Decapitating people, dismembering corpses, or gathering body parts could become addictions or habits for all I knew, so asserting that it's a thing might make it more convincing. Yeah, Seshiru really was the perfect candidate. I would make him the culprit. I couldn't have anyone find him for it to work, so I went to check on his whereabouts.

I followed Moppy's walking itinerary from the house to the Tamagawa River, then reached a small park next to the shore. Behind Inari-sama, the god worshiped in this Midori Park, there was a public toilet—Seshiru and Serika lived below it. Midori Park suddenly started getting much cleaner three years ago; the trash on the ground disappeared, the weeds were gone, the paint on Inari-sama and the toilet's walls was redone, the camellia, ginkgo, azalea, and willow were lopped, and three brand new sakura trees were planted—the inhabitants in the area around Keio-Tamagawa Station, which is generally quite bland, had quickly taken a liking and started treasuring this place. The mysterious volunteers rumored in the neighborhood to be living under the toilet were Seshiru and Serika.

I entered one of the stalls in the Midori Park's toilet behind Inari-sama. The floor, walls, ceiling, and Japanese toilets were all squeaky clean as though they were brand new. There was even a scent of potpourri in the air, somehow. I locked the door and waited. The pure-white toilet then came off, leaving space for Seshiru to come out of the floor in an attempt to grab me before he realized who I was and said, "Tsk, it's just you, Tsukumo?" This is how Seshiru and Serika had been living: abducting the men, women, children, grandpas, and grandmas who had the misfortune to enter one of the stalls and eating them.

"Here's your vitamins," I said, handing Seshiru the nutritional supplements I'd bought at a convenience store on the way here. He briefly thanked me before vanishing down the hole. The models installed were flush toilets, but the facility was actually built for pit toilets with a spacious room underneath. I followed Seshiru down the ladder to this polished, ventilated, and repainted room which got

carefully cleaned every day and even had a carpet floor. The room was furnished with a reclining chair, a dining table, a bed, and a bookshelf. Serika was standing next to the bed, returning to its case the syringe she planned on using to help out Seshiru if he'd come back down with prey. That syringe had a random poison in it. Probably detergent.

Once I reached the bottom, Seshiru climbed back up, set the toilet back into place, and came down. I had the two of them sit at the table while I made myself comfortable in the reclining chair.

"I have something I would need your help with, Serika," I said.

"Huh, what about me?" Seshiru said.

"It would be pretty bad to let you go outside right now, Seshiru."

"What? You're gonna make me into a culprit yet again?"

I nodded.

"How much's the reward this time?"

"Ten million," I answered honestly. "Five to me. Five to you."

"I'm in."

"You don't really have to do anything. Just be patient here."

"Staying here and doing nothing *is* the hard part."

"Don't be reckless. Your chest will get worse again."

My katana was still piercing Seshiru's left torso. It had stabbed his heart, but apparently in a really lucky spot, so Seshiru's heart was still functioning as normal and barely shed any blood. It seemed like his heart had effortlessly ignored the katana piercing it, but it had really stabbed it and even pierced through Seshiru's back. It must have happened due to the exact right conditions being met, like how when a needle manages to pass through a balloon. We'd trimmed the handle and tip of the katana and only left the part inside his body to be. If he took his shirt off, one should be able to observe the X mark I'd engraved on his left torso, and the section of the blade I'd pierced it at the center with and never took out. If the blade inside his chest were to move the slightest bit, Seshiru would assuredly hemorrhage and die. I couldn't have him exert himself. I couldn't let him die somewhere troublesome at a troublesome time.

"I only need Serika on this one," I said.

“Why are you and Serika always heading out somewhere without me?” Seshiru asked. He was suspecting there was something between Serika and me.

“Because you can’t go anywhere and Serika can. We should be done in under two hours, it won’t take long. We’ll even contact you from time to time.”

“What should I do?” Serika asked.

“You? Help.”

We came out of the toilet, leaving Seshiru behind. Once Seshiru put the toilet back into place and couldn’t see us anymore, Serika and I joined our lips. We then hid behind Inari-sama and joined our genitals. We had a good view over the Tamagawa River’s bank from Midori Park. Umi and Moppy weren’t around. They must have been strolling east on the bank. Serika caught my semen with her hands. I had Seshiru put on a condom every time so Serika wouldn’t get pregnant. But in my case I wanted her to feel me so I didn’t put any. Still, I didn’t want Serika to get pregnant so I made sure to ejaculate outside. I knew this wasn’t a fail-proof contraception method, but we’d done it that way for a while and Serika had yet to get pregnant.

I picked up an erotic magazine abandoned behind Inari-sama and read it until Serika came back from washing my semen off in the bathroom. I dropped the magazine back where I’d picked it up and explained the gist of the Serial Beauty Dismembered Case that was happening in Chofu to her: the 12 victims were all beautiful women. All of them had been decapitated with their heads taken away. Three of them had between one and two of their arms cut off and taken away. None of the missing heads and arms had been found yet. “But still, that’s really all we know. Let’s split and investigate on our own,” I said, to which Serika answered, “Got it.”

Serika then found useful information in the following 30 minutes. The seventh victim had been to the municipal ski resort of West Akatsuki, Fukui, back when she was in university. Serika talked with the victim’s friends who had been with her on this trip for more details on it during the next 30 minutes. It could work. I prepared a

text in 15 minutes. While doing so, I headed to the house of one of the victims' parents. I had Serika investigate something else in the meanwhile. I passed through that house's gate at the same time as I finished the text. I rang the chime. Kusanagi Yayoi answered the door. She was pretty. She was the big sister of the second victim, Kusanagi Kyouko, and looked identical to her little sister. My scenario slightly changed, but it was more credible this way.

Sitting face to face on the living room's sofa set, I asked Kusanagi Yayoi, "Have you had the opportunity to see Kyouko-san's body?"

"Yes."

"How did you feel about it?"

"That it was very sad."

"For your sister?"

"Yes."

"Why exactly?"

"Because her head was cut off."

"Not because she was murdered?"

"That played a part in it, for sure, but the fact that her head was cut off and missing...it, it's a bit..."

"A bit what?"

"A bit strange."

"Strange in what way?"

"Even if I know it's my sister's corpse, it kinda feels like it's not her."

"Due to her missing head."

"Yes."

"That's why the funeral has yet to..."

"Yes. We're waiting to find her head first."

There it was. Kusanagi Yayoi had trouble distinguishing between her cognition of other people and their cognitions of her. To Kusanagi Yayoi, a Kusanagi Kyouko without her familiar face was not 'Kusanagi Kyouko,' a Kusanagi Kyouko without the brain that stored all of her memories and maintained a coherent consciousness wasn't 'Kusanago Kyouko.' But people's souls aren't stored in one's brain, they are a

clump of energy, a spirit. Brains are mere tools that produce one's soul. If the family were to wait until they were given the head back to hold the funeral, that person's spirit might have to stand near their body, unable to rest in peace, for that whole duration. In reality, they should give her body alone a funeral, honor her memory, perform an exorcism on the crime scene, purify a few places the deceased used to visit often or held dearly, then do another funeral and memorial when they eventually get the head back. After all, normal people can't tell where one's ghost might be. If one doesn't have the will to go through this whole process, they should either give up on giving the deceased a surefire send off or hire a medium to find the specific spirit they are looking after.

I could barely tell. It's the kind of spot where one might drop and lose something, but Kusanagi Kyouko's spirit had probably fallen behind the bookshelf in her bedroom. If we made the room dark and peeped inside in silence, we might've gotten to see Kusanagi Kyouko doing something. I wasn't sure what that something would be, but she might've been fervently licking the back of the bookshelf. If so, we should've let her lick it for some more.

Enough with that. It's not like we were talking about my soul.

"I understand. It doesn't feel like that person without their head."

"Yeah."

"I will start explaining the mystery now."

Hearing my sudden claim, Kusanagai Yayoi, who had been looking in the distance, focused her eyes on me.

"You are right. A corpse without a head lacks the symbol that makes them *that person*. This is precisely the reason why the culprit decapitates their victims. They didn't want the discovered corpses to project their past personalities. The first step in expressing that intent was the decapitations.

"Then what did the culprit leave behind?

"A corpse, of course. A headless corpse is equivalent to flesh that has been voided of all personality. This is what God said as well. He said so after creating humans on the sixth day of Creation and having them proliferate on Earth: 'My spirit shall not always strive with man,

for that he also is flesh.' God decided that people shall live 120 years. In other words, humans are made to live for 120 years. But as you are well aware of, nobody keeps a functioning heart and brain for a full 120 years. Then how do people, meant to live 120 years, keep on living after either of these organs stop? By becoming spirits. Someone who has lived up to 80 years old will spend the last 40 years of their lives as a spirit. And Kyouko-san, who has passed away at the age of 21, will keep living for 99 more years as a spirit."

And will probably stay behind that shelf in her room on the second floor for the whole time.

"But spirits and bodies are separate. They exist in different places. Bodies are flesh. However, they are not only made out of flesh. Corpses are full of blood. They are, in a way, blood bags. But when decapitated, that blood will pour all over the floor. If we were to compare blood to wine, a headless corpse would be the perfect equivalent of a decanter. And spilled wine is a huge waste. Wine comes in three colors, white, red, and rosé. Bodily fluids are the same. There is the red blood, the yellow lymph fluid, and the colorless and transparent cerebrospinal fluid.

"The only tricolor national flags using red, white, and yellow are Northern Ireland's, Gibraltar's, and Jersey's. The Vatican would also count if we were to consider the colorless and transparent to be represented as silver-colored. These four countries' national flags have more in common than the colors used in them. Northern Ireland's and Jersey's each have a red cross and a yellow crown. The Vatican City State's flag also has crowns These three crowns, forming the papal tiara (triregnum), represent the authority of the pastor, of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and of the temporal power. A yellow and a silver key form a cross under the tiara. Gibraltar's flag also has a key. This one is situated underneath a castle with three spires. Please remember the image of the 'cross,' the existence of a 'king' hinted at by the crowns and the castle, and the keys—these are all important.

"Let's return to the blood.

"An immense amount of blood has spilled over these 12 murders. So much that it is more of a *flood* than mere *blood*.

“And in the Bible, right after setting people’s lifespan to 120 years, God saw that the wickedness of humans had grown great, regretted having created them, and brought about a flood. God killed every life on earth with that flood. However, are we presently dead, you and I?”

Kusanagi Yayoi shook her head at my question, “No.”

“Exactly.”

It was a lie. We were already dead. We merely hadn’t noticed yet.

“We are not dead. Which means we are God’s chosen, Noah. We are on the Ark. We will now avoid the flood of 150 days and witness everyone else die from within this ark. You and I are Noah’s family. Me being the husband and you being the wife.”

I approached Kusanagi Yayoi, who had been entranced by my beauty for a while now. She slightly flinched back on the sofa before tilting her flushed face sideways. I caught up to her and ran my lips across her neck. Kusanagi Yayoi then exploded. She stood up, then suddenly pinned me down against the rug on the floor and mounted me. I let her do as she pleased. Kusanagi Yayoi worked as a model just like her little sister used to, meaning she was tall and slender, yet quite powerful. She violently raped me. I personally didn’t mind that violence. She could go ahead and hurt me all she wanted.

However, Kusanagi Yayoi ended our intercourse with my eyes, ears, and nose still intact.

“I don’t get it,” she said and cried. “Why am I doing this?”

“I think people who meet me start to yearn for my children,” I said.

“Children?” she opened her reddened eyes wide and looked at me. “That can’t be right. I don’t want children.”

“Then nevermind,” I said, putting a hand between Kusanagi Yayoi’s legs, who had merely thrown her panties away and was still wearing a skirt, and plunging a finger in her vagina. Kusanagi Yayoi moaned and arched her back on the floor. I inserted my other fingers. I then pushed my whole hand inside. She moaned louder, “Haah! Aaah!” I stuffed my arm inside. My hand reached the back of Kusanagi Yayoi’s warm, wet, and tight flesh tunnel. I found a bundle of paper wrapped in vinyl there. “Ahhh! Oh, oh, don’t! What’s that? The fuck? I

don't get it, what is it!? What is it!? Help! Please, I'm scared! Aaaaah, a-ah, aaah! I can't!" I pulled it out.

That was a novel from 'Seiryouin Ryuusui.'

Episode Three - Seiryouin Ryuusui

Huh, weird, I thought. I'd received *Episode One* and *Episode Two* by mail, and the books I pulled out of women's bellies by sticking my hand inside their vaginas tended to be Kodansha Novels for the most part.

Looking at the bundle of vinyl-wrapped A4 paper that came out from her vagina, Kusanagi Yayoi raised a scream like someone was cutting through steel. She was so noisy I considered removing my glasses to make her faint while I read *Episode Three*, but decided against it. I had no time. I wanted to get my hands on the ten million yen before Umi and Moppy came back from their walk.

I took my cell out of my pocket and called Serika. "Yes?" "Where are you?" "Almost there." "Hurry." "I'm about ten meters away." "Okay, I'll step out then." "Got it." I hung up and spoke to Kusanagi Yayoi, who was still wailing, "Calm down. That was a magic trick." "Eh? Huh?" "I just wanted to give you a fright." "Huh? What? That was...not real?" "Nope," I said, swiftly dodging the slap Kusanagi Yayoi tried to deliver on my cheeks and using that momentum to stand up.

"Wine spilled from the corpse and left it empty. We must pour wine into the toppled decanter anew."

I picked up the bag containing *Episode Three*, pulled on Kusanagi Yayoi's hand to make her stand, then took her to the entrance. Serika arrived right when I opened the door. She was carrying an enormous black sports bag on her shoulders. Seeing me wave at her, she put on a big smile and ran over to me. "Sorry for the wait～," she said. I pointed at Kusanagi Yayoi, who was standing still at the entrance with teary eyes, and introduced her, "This lady is Kusanagi Yayoi-san, Kyouko-san's elder sister." "Nice to meet you, my name is Kirika Mai,"

Serika said before stepping inside the house and putting the bag down. “Hello,” Kusanagi Yayoi replied with a faint voice. “What is this? I don’t get what’s happening, like, at all.” “I will explain the rest,” I told her, “but first, I want to ask you some questions, Kusanagi-san. Do you want your sister’s head back?”

“Well, yeah, of course.”

“Do you want your sister’s murderer to be arrested?”

“Obviously.”

“Would you do whatever it takes for it?”

She thought it over. But she was barely done having sex with me, she should still be feeling adventurous.

“I guess? I might do anything I can.”

I nodded. I knew Kusanagi Yayoi wouldn’t falter. “Then, let us pour wine into the decanter.”

I pulled the sports bag over to us and flicked the zipper open in one motion. The Adidas bag contained Kusanagi Kyouko’s corpse.

Without her head. But that wasn’t the only thing missing from it.

There were no bones. No organs. No stains of blood either. There was only her skin and flesh. Being a model, Kusanagi Kyouko didn’t have a lot of those.

Kusanagi Yayoi couldn’t recognize her sister when she was stuffed inside the bag, but when I picked her up and spread her in front of her eyes, she immediately broke into a scream.

Overshadowed by Kusanagi Yayoi’s loud and shrilling screams, there was a rumble upstairs. Something slowly crawled and rubbed against the floor up to the spot right above us.

Kusanagi Kyouko had noticed her corpse’s presence and came out from behind her bookshelf.

I hurriedly undressed. I took my sweater off, followed by my shirt, my shoes, my pants, and finally my underwear. I then picked up Kusanagi Kyouko’s flesh, put a foot inside through the opening in the back, and thrust my toes all the way down Kusanagi Kyouko’s slender, long, and viscous legs. When my toes roughly reached Kusanagi Kyouko’s heel, I put my other foot inside. Again, when this foot’s toes reached her heel, I sat on the floor and inserted my toes inside

Kusanagi Kyouko's. Once all ten of them were fully in, I stood up and did the arms next. When my right hand was around her right elbow, I noticed that Kusanagi Kyouko had come down from the second floor and was intently looking at me from below the stairs, letting only her face out. She only seemed puzzled at what I was doing to her body, I couldn't feel any harmful intent. Good. I inserted my right and left hands inside Kusanagi Kyouko's, pushed my ten fingers inside hers, and had Serika close the zipper on the back. Serika was the one who'd pulled the bones and organs out, wiped the blood, and sewed a zipper on her.

I turned around to Kusanagi Yayoi, wearing Kusanagi Kyouko's naked body like a swimsuit.

The victim's elder sister had passed out while standing. I'd never seen that happen before. I could tell that Kusanagi Kyouko was hesitating on whether to jump inside her now-empty sister from under the stairs. I told her off like when I scold Moppy, "Nay nay, Kusanagi Kyouko, bad. Nay." She climbed back up to the second floor. She probably returned to behind her shelf. We would have saved some time if Kusanagi Kyouko was capable of speech right now, but alas.

"Serika, what's the time?"

"Half past five."

"Only 30 minutes left. Let's hurry," I said, closing my eyes. I focused on Kusanagi Kyouko's flesh wrapped around my body.

2

People's memories aren't only stored inside their brains. All of one's memory is stored inside their entire body. It's pretty frequent for someone who's had a cornea transplanted to start seeing things their donor had seen, or for someone who received a heart or other internal organs to remember or feel things their donors had experienced.

I could understand various things by wearing Kusanagi Kyouko's body. It conveyed her skin's memory to me.

Many hands touched Kusanagi Kyouko. Sexual stimuli came first. Many big hands fondled Kusanagi Kyouko's small breasts and butt. Her genitals, enveloping my crotch, became hot. All the sexual

experiences she'd had in her 21 years alive rushed to me at once, arousing me, stirring me up, and making me climax almost to the point of breaking. I couldn't stop drool, snot, and tears from flowing off my face, my ears were shedding blood.

Once I'd survived the initial wave, I then experienced Kusanagi Kyouko's last memory before she died.

A man was touching me (= Kusanagi Kyouko). He was violent. He grabbed one of my arms. His hand was big. I (Kusanagi Kyouko) shook his hand off and started running. I was sweating. I was shaking. I had goosebumps. I was weakened and couldn't run well. My hands touched the ground. A pebble lying on top of the asphalt stabbed the palm of my hand. My knees hurt. The man kicked my hips. I (Kusanagi Kyouko) was sent rolling. The asphalt was hard. The man mounted me. His soft butt rested on my chest. I kicked the man with my knees. But the man caught my legs with both hands. What!? The man sitting on my (Kusanagi Kyouko's) chest should be facing me, he couldn't possibly catch both of my legs. My (Kusanagi Kyouko's) legs were pulled away—and thus I understood. The culprit worked in pairs. Two people were pinning me down. Something stabbed my left torso. A needle. The man sitting on my chest was injecting me with something. My (Kusanagi Kyouko's) consciousness faded away. So did my memory. Before everything faded to nil, I focused on the difference between the hands of the man who'd initially grabbed my hand, kicked me down, and sat on my chest, and the hands of the man restraining my legs. The first man's hands were big, fat, thick, soft, and warm. The other man's hands were slender, bony, and quite cold. The second man's nails were long. His nails painfully dug into my (Kusanagi Kyouko's) ankles.

Now that I had calmed down and could only remember things like the warmth of the sun or the coldness of the wind at night, I looked at Kusanagi Kyouko's ankles. They were adorned with ten fingernail marks.

The sheer coldness of the palms of the man who'd left these crescent-shaped marks on her ankles made chills run down my spine.

Ten fingernail marks.

Oh, I thought.

The big hands that were restraining my arm. The thick hands that had grabbed my arm. Had these thick fingers left ten marks?

They hadn't.

I looked at my arms enveloped by Kusanagi Kyouko's. Her slender arms were loaded to the brim with mine, so the shape of the culprit's hands were stretched. His handprints were very definite. But my memory was vivid. I remembered the hand that had grabbed my arm. That was a right hand, but I could only feel four fingers from it. It was missing a ring finger.

So someone with a pinky finger but no ring finger. No yakuza would cut their ring finger off but not their pinky. That wasn't a yakuza's right hand. He hadn't lost his ring finger in a yakuza ritual but due to an incident or someone else's doing. Either way, he had likely been treated at a hospital. I could get closer to the culprit if I looked into that. But I wanted the ten million yen right now, I couldn't afford to be that diligent.

All the victims had been killed by being injected with toilet detergent. The benefit of killing with chemical injections is that it minimizes external damage to the victim. It only leaves the hole made by the syringe. But despite using such a clean method, they'd treated the victim quite roughly before that. They'd kicked me and made me roll on the ground. And most importantly, they'd decapitated me right after I'd died. Cutting off someone's recently-dead head results in a huge amount of blood spilling out. The missing heads must have been drenched in blood too. And yet the culprit used syringes. They killed women by injecting them with poison. People who think of using poison to kill someone tend to be physically weak themselves. A woman. Toilet detergent. I looked at Serika. She was wiping the drool, snot, tears, and blood from my face and under my ears. Her face was close to mine. I had a map in my head. There was another park 300 meters north of Midori Park. Ikoino Square. It was behind my house. It had a public toilet too. That park had recently gained the reputation of being clean, so housewives started frequenting it despite it being a small park with only a sandpit, a slide, swings, and some benches.

Umi and I took Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest to it to enjoy the sun. I had met plenty of women and had sex with them there. Most often in one of the public toilet stalls. Mothers with kids, women without kids, or even girls who were still kids themselves, entranced by my beauty, took me to the toilet in the order they arrived at the park. That toilet was as clean as one you'd find in a department store, so these women generally didn't mind. It had been repainted, had its door replaced, had shiny new tiles adorning the floor, and never had any trash lying around. Just like Midori Park's toilet.

I didn't even need to draw a line between the spots where these 12 women had been killed—they were all near Ikoino Square. All almost equidistant to it.

I didn't know whose hands had been restraining Kusanagi Kyouko's ankles. But Serika was in possession of someone's hands. Some dead man's hands. She'd cut these hands off, removed the bones, taken the extra muscles out, and used those as gloves when killing Kusanagi Kyouko and the other 11 women.

And she cut their heads off. Because they contained one's eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. If their corpses still had their heads, I could have worn them like a ski mask, removed my eyeballs, inserted the victim's inside my sockets, and seen Serika's face, heard Serika's breaths, smelled Serika's shampoo or perfume, and maybe, if the victim had been brave enough to bite at her, felt her sweat and blood on my tongue. But preventing that wasn't the only reason she'd cut their heads off. Serika probably didn't want me to see her desperate face that'd been reflected in the victims' eyes when killing them. She must have found that embarrassing.

But she still wanted me to solve the mystery and come to her; that's why she cut the ring finger off the hands she would turn into gloves. Or maybe she chose someone who didn't have one to begin with. She had left that hint expecting I would check medical records and get closer to her.

Still wearing Kusanagi Kyouko in the Kusanagi house's entrance, I asked Serika:

"Serika, did something happen between you and Seshiru?"

“Tsukumo,” Serika said. “I didn’t kill these women because I love you and got jealous of them, okay?”

She’d noticed I had noticed. “I don’t care about that. Are you having a fight with Seshiru?”

“We’re merely living apart. I just felt like we should put more distance between us and live separately.”

“And these people sullied your new toilet?”

“They did. They’re all so dirty.”

She couldn’t capture the people who entered the toilet on the spot and eat them without Seshiru around. They would satisfy their needs and sully Serika’s house. She could simply live somewhere other than under a toilet, especially the public toilet from the park behind my house, but she’d done that anyway to attract my attention. She watched me have sex with all sorts of strangers on purpose. And she’d murdered for no reason because of it. But I’d had sex with many more women inside Ikoino Square. Many of them should have qualified for the pretext of ‘sullying the toilet’ Serika had chosen to operate in. In fact, a fair amount of people had stopped coming to Inoiko Square lately.

If these people had all been killed, why had only 12 of them been decapitated and found?

“I threw the other people in the Tamagawa River, but someone bought these 12 off me.”

“Someone?”

“Someone from the Castle of Illusions.”

The ten fingernail marks on Kusanagi Kyouko’s ankles were his.

“He comes over when I kill someone pretty and helps me out. He cuts that person’s head, sometimes arms too, and takes them away.”

“Hmm. And he comes from inside the castle?”

“Yeah. Apparently he’s using the old sewer system underneath the castle. These sewers are so old nobody knows about it anymore.”

“So that person didn’t tell anyone about that sewer path and kept the other people trapped inside the castle, right? He’s the culprit to the Castle of Illusions Case. Do you know who he is?”

“He said he was ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui.’ But in reality he’s ‘the Great

Detective Tsukumojuuku.' I mean, he looks just like you, Tsukumo. That's why I give him these women's heads and stuff."

I sighed.

When Kusanagi Kyouko's spirit had left the back of that bookshelf, descended downstairs, and was about to attack someone, that someone wasn't Kusanagi Yayoi—it was Serika. She wasn't trying to take over her big sister's empty body, but trying to take revenge on the person who had killed her. Good thing I'd told her off. Serika would have gone through a hell of a time.

I had to get Serika out of this house before Kusanagi Kyouko came downstairs a second time.

3

I let Serika explain the situation to Seshiru and had them escape from Midori Park for the time being. Serika said she didn't want to leave me and cried. Seshiru's pain showed on his face. *But I'm married to Umi and have three kids. I don't yearn for you as much as I used to, Serika*, I said. Serika knew this full-well already. But love lingers inside the memory of one's body. As long as one possesses a brain capable of forming words, a heart pumping blood, and a soul in their body, the love their body once knew of will never fully fade away. But, at the root of it, my love for Serika only existed within my memory now. No matter how many times we have had sex and refreshed those memories, that didn't change.

Seshiru and Serika vanished from Chofu, the many corpses they had yet to finish eating remained beneath Midori Park's toilet, and a man's hands remained under Ikoino Square's toilet. Serika had told me that man's name already. Ookubo Kengo. That was sufficient proof. I returned Kusanagi Kyouko's corpse to the police and used the occasion to solve the Chofu Serial Beauty Dismembered Case, but I merely made Seshiru out to be the culprit and kept Serika's jealousy and bloodthirst secret. Seshiru had gotten mad at people for sullying his toilet villa and acted alone. They were already on the wanted list anyway. Also, the police wouldn't catch them anyway. Unless they suddenly got smart enough to check under public toilets.

I told the police about the many corpses ‘Seshiru’ had thrown into the Tamagawa River, said they should search for a man missing both hands who should be Ookubo Kengo, accepted the ten million yen, stopped by the bank on the way back to deposit five million into Seshiru and Serika’s account, bought the newest *Gunzo*, *Shincho*, *Bungakukai*, and *Subaru* from a bookstore for my mother-in-law, and came home. I met up at the front door with Umi who was coming back from her walk. Just in time.

But my mother-in-law questioned me about the five million yen I came home with when I should have received ten, and I realized I’d forgotten to come up with a reason for it. Crap. Cowering in front of her and unable to come up with a good lie, I just said, *I must have dropped it somewhere, haha*, and ultimately got scolded despite bringing five million back home.

Umi, however, kept a big smile on her face and didn’t say anything to me. Moppy, too, kept grinning and panting and didn’t say anything to me. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, as well, kept their innocent smiles up and didn’t say anything to me. I loved my family.

Well, I didn’t quite hate my mother-in-law.

“That’s our great detective, Tsukumojuuku, so cool~,” Umi praised me. My mother-in-law came in while I was acting modest to her.

“Tsutomu-san. They announced a reward for the Castle of Illusions Case. The castle’s owner said he would pay 30 million yen. 30 whole million. His name was Yanbe Tetsuo I think? Does being a famous artist make you that rich? I mean, he lives in a castle and all.”

I stopped pretending to be embarrassed, put down the hand that was behind my head, and said, “I’ll do my best.”

My mother-in-law then said, “When you get the 30 million, first you’ll repay me the five million yen, then we’ll split the 25 remaining half-half between me and you.”

I didn’t get what she meant by ‘repaying five million’ and ‘splitting

half-half between her and us,' so I just repeated, "I'll do my best."

"Do that, mister Great Detective," she said. "After all, solving tough cases like this one is the only way you have of making a buck."

My mother-in-law left and Umi said, *Well, you know how mom can be mean-spirited sometimes*, laughing it off. I complained about her silence during that exchange, but she just said, *I mean, it would be awesome to get the 30 million, so if that makes you motivated I'll keep my mouth shut for now. I'll let mom put pressure on you so you just give it your all~. Also, I really want the 30 million to buy a new telescope*, and laughed.

I wasn't sure whether my standing would rise with 30 million. At least now I knew five million wasn't nearly enough.

I read 'Seiryouin Ryuusui's' *Episode Three* next to Umi and the triplets who had all fallen asleep. 'Ookubo Kengo' appeared inside as the culprit to Nagoya's Mass Decapitation Case. Both this and the decapitation case that took place in Chofu in the real world had been conducted at 'Ookubo Kengo's' *hands*.

Thinking I might come across similar overlaps tomorrow when solving the Castle of Illusions Case, I memorized the manuscript word for word.

'Seiryouin Ryuusui' was trapped inside the 'Castle of Illusions' in *Episode Three*. I might actually get to meet them tomorrow after infiltrating the castle. I would take that chance to ask them how they were writing these novels and how they'd delivered *Episode Three* inside Kusanagi Yayoi's uterus.

The sewers, huh, I thought. I hadn't delved into the 'underground' of the 'Castle of Illusions' since my Gajobun days.

Well, at least Gibraltar's national flag had meaning to it. The 'key' was indeed 'below the castle.' The crosses and crowns were bound to have meaning to them as well. I couldn't wait for tomorrow to come.

30 million yen...of which we would only get our hands on 12.5 million, it seemed.

I ate breakfast, brushed my teeth, washed my face, changed clothes, packed all sorts of things into a bag which I carried on my shoulders, said, “I’m heading out,” and left the house. Umi, holding Tolerant and Sincere in her arms, and my mother-in-law, holding Honest in her arms, said, “Have a good trip~,” then started cheering, “30 million! 30 million! 30 million!” so I quickly got out of there. Ikoino Square, behind my house, had been constantly full of police officers since last night. A few of them greeted me upon seeing me walk by. I waved at them. A man with a camera hanging off his neck, seemingly a reporter, ran over to me and started interviewing me, “You are the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku-san, right?” Three police officers who witnessed that came over and quickly escorted him away. I had warned the police forces long ago that if any information regarding me were to be made public, I would stop helping with their investigations on the spot. And I would also take my sunglasses off.

I was obviously worried that Suzuki-kun and Tsutomu would learn about my whereabouts and come over to me.

“Thank you for yesterday,” another officer said, approaching me, so I greeted him before crouching and opening a manhole in the road. Surprised, the officer asked, “Huh, where are you going, Tsukumo-san?” so I answered, “I’m just checking something nearby.” Saying I was headed to the Castle of Illusions would result in a big commotion. I didn’t want to have to lead tons of officers down the narrow, pungent, and old sewers while searching for the castle’s entrance. I would first head inside alone and then, if absolutely necessary, open up the castle’s front gate from the inside.

I left the dumbfounded officer behind, delved down the manhole, and closed the lid after me. It was dark below. I grabbed a flashlight from my bag and turned it on. The sewers were full of spirits.

4

I could figure out the path leading to the Castle of Illusions by looking at the spirits. Murders had always and still were taking place

all the time inside that castle. All the dead people faced in the direction of the Castle of Illusions in the darkness of the sewers and stared at it. With resentment, grief, and all sorts of painful emotions on their faces.

The spirits were useful as guideposts when heading to the castle, but the moment I entered its plot the sewers became packed to the brim with ghosts, such that I had to brush them away with my hands if I wanted to make any progress forward.

After some hard-earned advancement, I reached a lid many spirits were intently looking at and opened it—it led to a well-like, vertical hole going up. A lot of spirits were trying to crawl their way up the hole, but they all froze somewhere along the way like cicada molts, which was awfully convenient for me since I could just use the spirits as a ladder and easily find myself at the top.

I arrived at a twisty and pipe-infested space seemingly used as a settling basin. I sat on the rim of the hole and took a deep breath. There was a coiled rope ladder at my feet. The man who looked like me and called himself 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' must have been using it to leave the castle. If he was the culprit of the Castle of Illusions Case, none of his victims were in the sewers I'd used to come here. If they were, they would notice him when he came down there and put him through hell.

Having rested enough on a sewer pipe's rim, I stood up and walked through the four settling pools all connected through pipes. Once out of them, I left the dark, abandoned water treatment room where not a drop of water remained.

I progressed down a hallway and climbed a set of stairs, but I didn't know where I was and had no spirits to guide me, so I used my voice.

"Excuse me! Is anyone there?!"

I waited but got no reply. It was too silent. My voice hadn't even echoed.

But I could hear screams quite clearly.

For the time being, my goal was to head up, so I wandered around in search of stairs when I heard a man wailing, "Aaaaaaaah, I

caaaaan't! Stop it, I beg you! Seriouuuuuuuusly!" I ran towards the source of that voice, taking a turn in the hallway, then another turn, yet again a turn, passing through a door, running some more, taking another turn, passing through yet another door, going to the right, then to the left, and finally found stairs at the end of it. I ran up them. "What's even happening anymooooooore! Aaaaaah, I don't get it! There's no meaning behind this! Just stop it! Please, stop! Please!" "Calm down, Abe." "What, just let me go home, for fuck's sake~. I can't stay in this place any longer, man~." "Calm down. Don't cry." "Yeah, don't cry, Abe." "Shut up guys! Lemme cry whenever I want to! What's the problem with a man crying?!" "There's nothing wrong with men crying, but stop it, Abe. You're being hella annoying." "Huh? What's your deal now, y'all? You're not my friends at all, eh~. Why can't I cry then, tell me." "I just told you the reason. It's so annoying. You'll be okay so don't cry, Abe. Your pupil will do something about it." "I keep telling you, he's my disciple, not my pupil." "...How is that not the same?" "As I explained already, a pupil is—" the voice of the man talking about the difference between 'pupil' and 'disciple' came from right beyond the door before my eyes. I opened that door. It led to an immense chapel with impressive stone pillars connecting to an arch 30 meters above us. The walls were furnished with traceries, high windows, and triforiums betwixt the pillars, with the traceries and high windows using stained glass, luxuriantly coloring the vast interior space with the light that shone through them. The aisle and ambulatory behind the pillars made their ways all around the vast chapel, with vestibules further behind them. There was a big gate and a porch at one end of the chapel overlooked by an imposing, enormous rose window. Facing the rose window, at the other end of the chapel, was naturally an altar; it was surrounded by yellow mosaics shining ardently, yet not dazzlingly. At the center of the altar, about 15 meters above the floor, was a cross where a statue of Christ was crucified onto.

Pews were installed in both the inner and outer sanctuaries watched over from above by the statue of Jesus, and in the middle of these, at the delimitation between the inner and outer sanctuary, was

a crowd of a dozen young men and women. I recognized one of them. The man who fervently offered an explanation on the differences between a ‘pupil’ and a ‘disciple’ while crying his eyes out and was so entranced he hadn’t noticed me entering through a door on the side was the oh-so-nostalgic Abe Atsushi = Daibakushou Happy. “Abe-san,” I called out to him. But he was still panicking and didn’t hear me. I spotted a box on the table at the center of the altar. Hoh, so this is what scared Abe so much.

It was a rectangular box composed of four planks, a bottom, and no lid, propped up so that it was facing our way from the altar. It contained a woman’s severed head. I didn’t know who that pale face belonged to, but the makeup applied on it gave off a strange impression: her right cheek was painted red while her left cheek had a blue circle drawn on it. Her eyebrows towering over her wide-open eyes were trimmed short, which made for a bizarre look due to her thick eyeliner and fake eyelashes. There was leftover space above the head inside the propped up box. It was fully painted in black and above it had ‘Castle of Illusions’ written in red and ‘5’ in blue. Next to the head, on her right side, was the puppet of a black-clad clown.

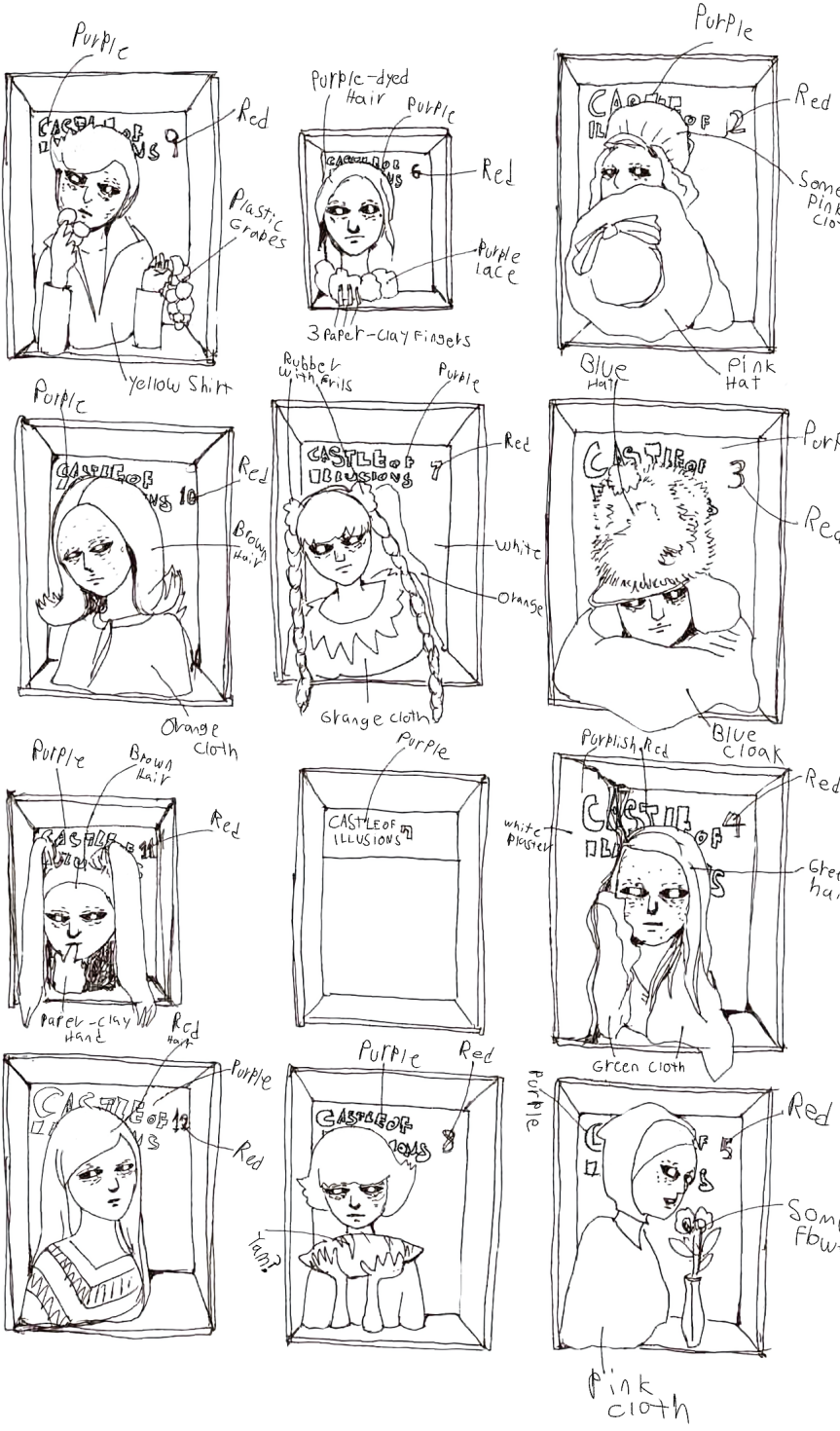
Hmm, I thought.

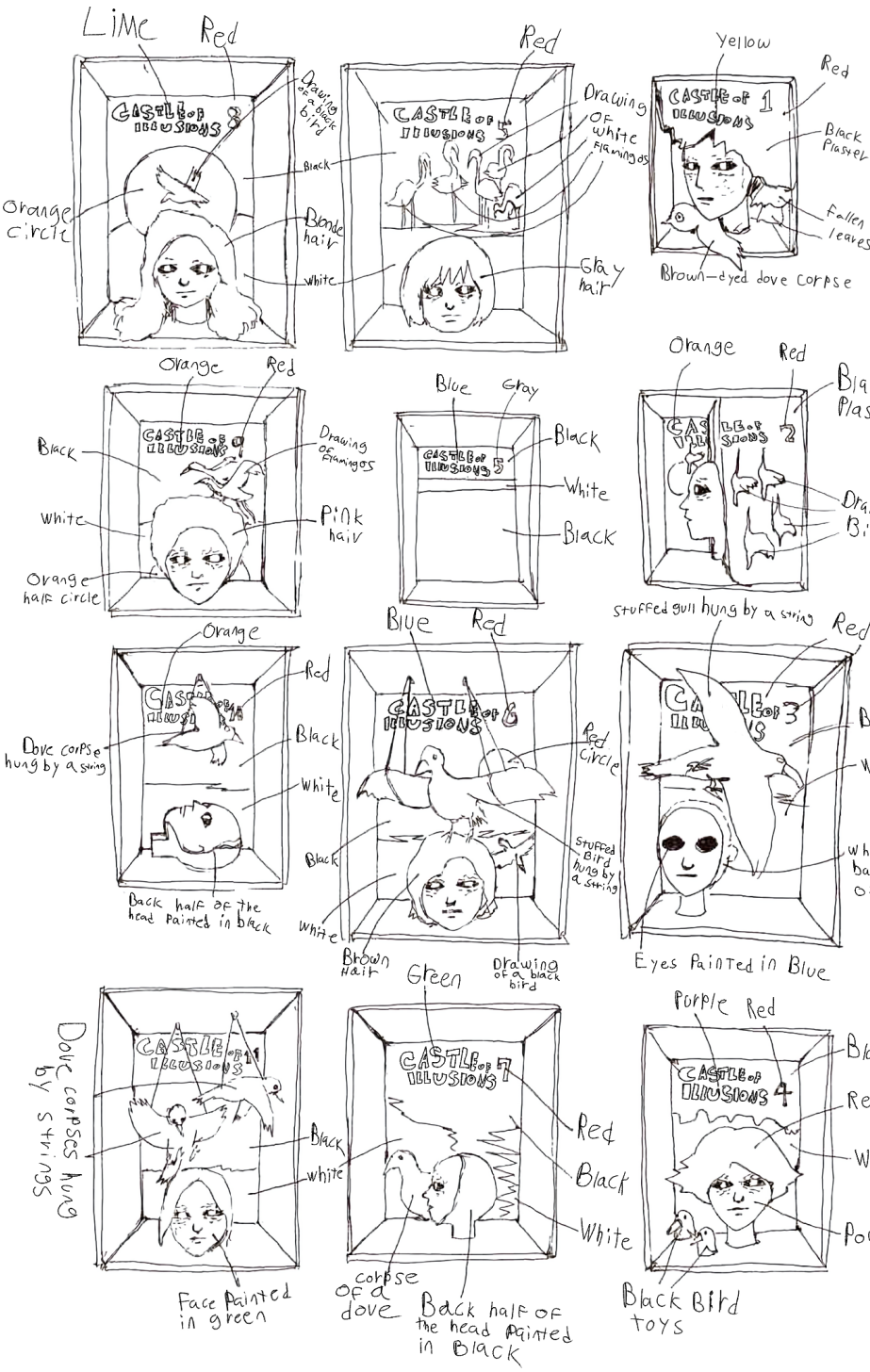
This wasn’t the only box on the altar. There was a long, singular line of 42 boxes behind the table, all facing us. They slightly differed in size, but were all rectangular and built similarly from what I could tell. Each one of them contained a woman’s corpse. Most had severed heads, but every so often there would be a box with an entire upper body. Each of the boxes were decorated in some way: they had the face painted in various colors, contained plushies, and were attributed a number. It started at the left edge with Castle of Illusions 2, 3, 4, all the way up to Castle of Illusions 12, then returned back to Castle of Illusions 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. until Castle of Illusions 12, where it reverted once again to Castle of Illusions 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. for 42 boxes. The 43rd was the one on the table: Castle of Illusions 5. Only three of the boxes didn’t contain bodies of women. These boxes’ numbers overlapped with the ones preceding them, so next to Castle of Illusions 7 in sixth position was another Castle of Illusions 7 in the seventh position; the

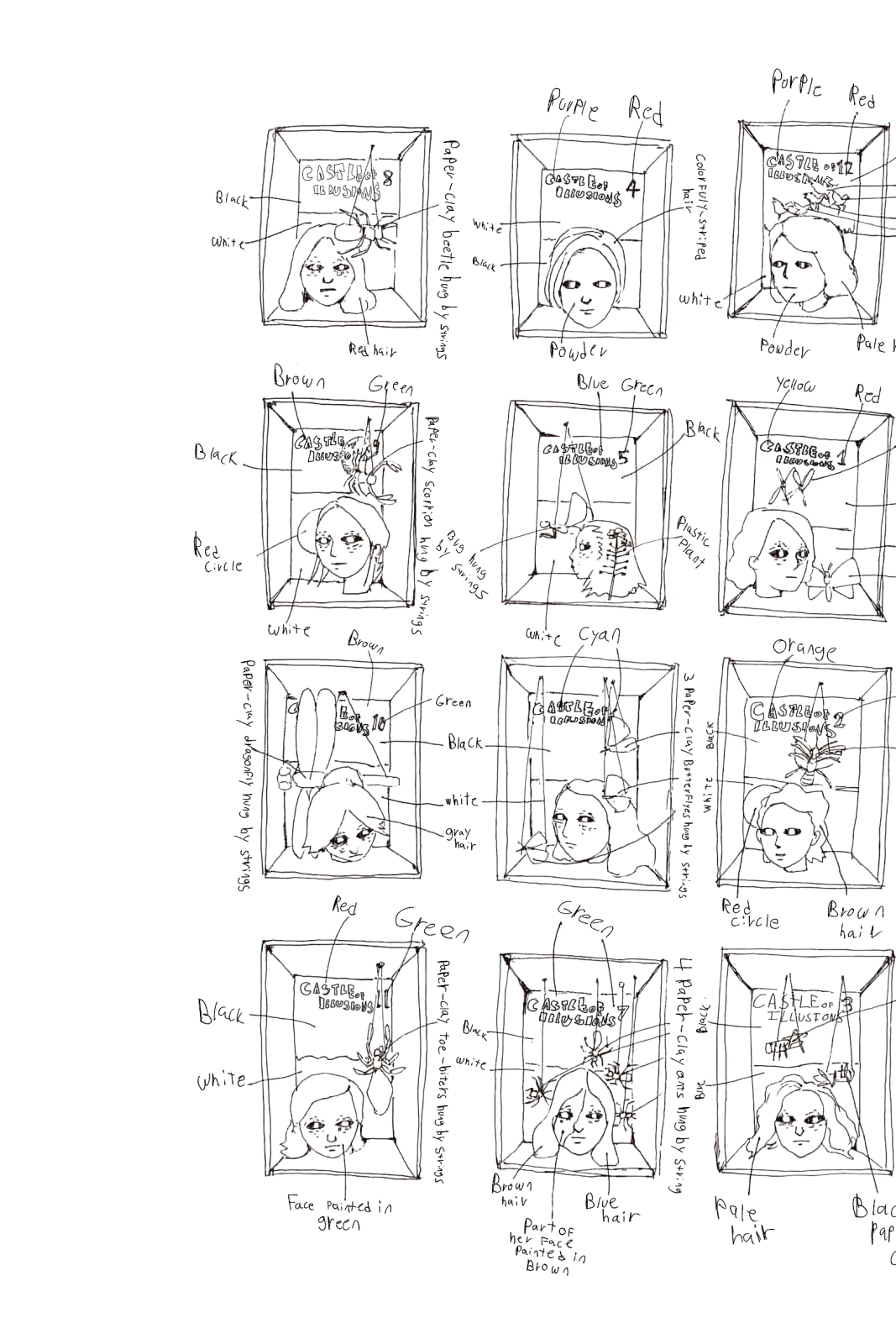
16th box, Castle of Illusions 5, had one more Castle of Illusions 5 next to it; and next to the 38th box from the left, Castle of Illusions 1, was another Castle of Illusions 1. To differentiate them, I will call the empty boxes Castle of Illusions ⑦, ⑤, and ①. ⑦ and ⑤ were completely empty. I knew what they were meant to contain, and why, instead of having a woman's head, ① had a big, jet-black hand made out of clay. All of the 43 boxes on the altar constituted a mitate of the front covers of the mystery magazine *Castle of Illusions* which ran from 1975 to 1979.

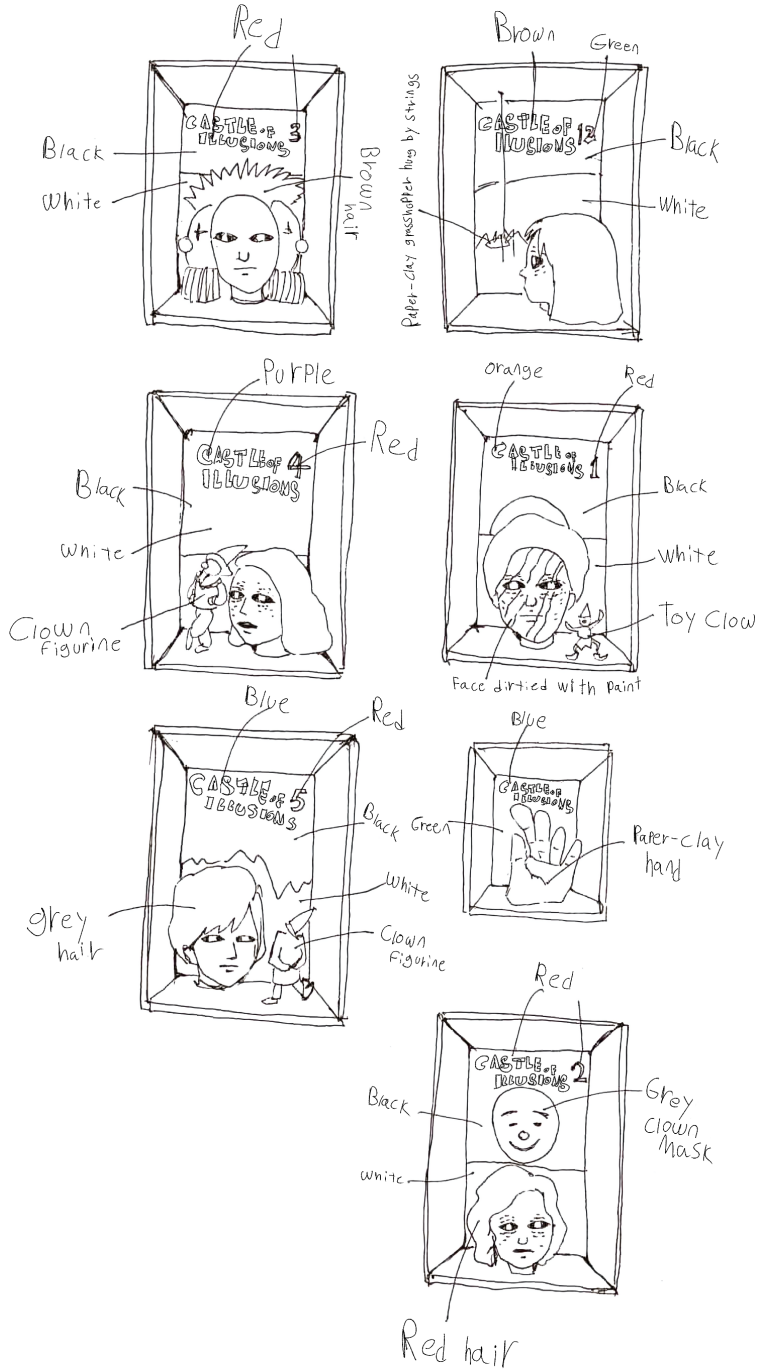
Castle of Illusions' publication started with *Castle of Illusions: February Issue* which came out in January of 1975 and continued for 53 issues until it ceased with *Castle of Illusions: July Issue* which came out in 1979. The boxes on the altar were the first 43 issues, with the empty boxes being 1975's *Castle of Illusions: July Special Issue* and 1976's *Castle of Illusions: May Special Issue*, and the box with the black clay hand being 1978's *Castle of Illusions: New Years Special Issue*. Which meant that *Castle of Illusions: 1975 July Special Issue* should contain Edogawa Ranpo's upper torso and *Castle of Illusions: 1976 May Special Issue* should contain Yokomizo Seishi's head and arms.

Here is a graph of the 43 *Castle of Illusions* mitate:


Purple
Red
Plastic Grapes
Yellow Shirt
Purple-dyed Hair
Purple
Red
Purple lace
3 Paper-clay Fingers
Purple
Red
Some Pink Clo
Pink Hat
Blue Hair
Purple
Red
Brown Hair
Orange Cloth
Rubber with frils
Purple
Red
White
Orange
Orange cloth
Blue Cloak
Purple
Brown Hair
Red
Paper-clay Hand
Red Hair
Purple
Red
White plastic
Green Cloth
Purple
Red
Pink cloth


Lime
Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 8
Drawing of a black bird
Black
Orange circle
Blonde hair
White
Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 5
Drawing of white flamingos
Gray hair
Yellow
Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 1
Black Plaster
Fallen leaves
Brown-eyed dove corpse
Orange
Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 9
Black
Drawing of flamingos
White
Pink hair
Orange half circle
Blue
Gray
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 3
Black
White
Black
Orange
Red
Stuffed gull hung by a string
Orange
Red
Dove corpse hung by a string
Black
White
Black
Back half of the head painted in black
Blue
Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 6
Red circle
Stuffed Bird hung by a string
White
Brown Hair
Drawing of a black bird
Red
Eyes Painted in Blue
Dove corpses hung by strings
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 1
Black
white
Face Painted in green
Green
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 7
Red
Black
White
corpse of a dove
Back half of the head Painted in Black
Purple Red
CASTLE OF ILLUSIONS 4
Black Bird toys


CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 8
Black
White
Red hair
Paper-clay beetle hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 4
Purple
Red
White
Black
Powder
Colorfully-striped hair
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 12
Purple
Red
White
Powder
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 9
Brown
Green
Black
Red circle
White
Paper-clay Scorpion hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 5
Blue
Green
Black
Bug hung by strings
White
Plastic plant
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 1
Yellow
Red
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 10
Brown
Green
Black
White
gray hair
Paper-clay pterosaurs hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS
White
Cyan
3 Paper-Clay Butterflies hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 2
Orange
Black
White
Red circle
Brown hair
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 11
Red
Green
Black
White
Face painted in green
Paper-clay toe-biters hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 7
Green
Black
White
Brown hair
Part of her face painted in Brown
Blue hair
4 Paper-clay arms hung by string
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 3
Black
Blue
Pale hair
Black


Red
Black
White
Brown hair
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 3
Brown
Green
Black
White
Paper-clay grasshopper hung by strings
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 12
Purple
Red
Black
White
Clown Figurine
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 4
orange
Red
Black
White
Toy Clown
Face dirtied with paint
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 1
Blue
Red
Black
Green
White
Grey hair
Clown Figurine
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 5
Blue
Paper-clay hand
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS
Red
Black
White
Grey clown mask
Red hair
CASTLE of ILLUSIONS 2

The fourth box starting from the left had Kusanagi Kyouko's head wrapped in a pink scarf, her bangs brushed to the sides and pink lipstick applied to her. Poor Kusanagi Kyouko. I wished that the white roses inside her box could comfort her, but that had no chance of happening. Her spirit was behind her bedroom bookshelf.

The twelve leftmost heads belonged to the women Serika had provided. Why would the culprit need the first twelve heads to be from outside the Castle of Illusions? I knew the reason. The *Castle of Illusions* magazine's first thirteen issues were published by Geneisha. Geneisha then went bankrupt and the magazine's publication was inherited by the newly-founded Castle of Illusions Corp. These circumstances had pushed him to bring women's corpses from *outside the Castle of Illusions* for the twelve issues from 1975 February to 1976 January. Very meticulous. One needed to be quite into mystery novels to notice a mitate based on the *Castle of Illusions* magazine years after its run. Maybe that was the case for most people who came to this castle.

I returned my eyes to the crying Abe and called for his name once more. "Abe-san."

A girl amongst the 17 people surrounding him finally noticed me. "Abeckham, someone's calling for you." Abe turned his messy and teary face to me. He was indeed Abe Atsushi. It had been three years since I'd last seen him, but he hadn't changed at all. His face was still as round, his eyes as slender, and his eyebrows and lips as thick. "Who are you?" he asked. "Long time no see, I'm Katou Tsukumojuuku." "Huh? Tsukumojuuku?" "Tsutomu's big brother. Our houses were close to each other back in West Akatsuki, Fukui." "Ah, o-ohhhh, right. Tsutomu's big bro, huh," he remembered, still on his knees with reddened eyes. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course, been a while huh. We didn't play together much, but how've you been doing? Wait, but what are you doing here? Were you here from the start? Does Tsutomu know about you being here?" I tilted my head. "I've entered this castle from the outside just now. Using the sewers below the castle. Is Tsutomu here?" "Eh, eh? Hold on. You came from the

outside? The fuck is that sewer thing? There's a way out of here?" "Yeah," I said, making not just Abe but everyone in the room shout in joy. They exchanged handshakes and patted each other's shoulders or backs while the girls hugged each other. But Abe was the most delighted of them all; he raised both hands, still kneeling, clenched them, opened his mouth wide, and closed his eyes—as though a peasant expecting a miraculous droplet of God's mercy to fall from the heavens.

A tall man came out of the group that started singing, "Kick, kick, kick! Fourth dimension kick!," out of glee and grabbed my hands. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I could never thank you enough. We're all from a talent agency called the Angel Bunnies, what's your name?" "I'm the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku."

Everyone stopped dancing and singing upon hearing these words. Even Abe, who was looking high above, closed his mouth, opened his eyes, and slowly moved his eyes to me.

"What does that mean?" one of the girls asked me. *Nothing special*, I thought of saying, but Abe opened his fists he had pointed at the sky and covered his eyes. "Moooo~ore fuckery yeeeeeeeet again~!" He started crying again. The other members were confused as well, though none of them cried like Abe.

These people might have read the Kodansha Novels-published JDC Series and were surprised to see someone use the same name as the fictional character that was the 'Great Detective Tsukumo Juuku'—or so I thought until Abe said this, "The fuck~, that's the third 'Great Detective Tsukumojuuku' already~. I'm so lost~, fucking hell~. Is this world made out of Tsukumojuukus or what~?" Yes it was, Abe Atsushi.

"Don't cry, Abe," the man who was holding my hands told him. "At least we can get out of this place now."

"Hold on a minute," I said. "Has someone solved the case?"

"Eh? Not yet, but..."

"Then I cannot let you out of this castle. The culprit might be one of you, after all."

"Huh..."

The man was flabbergasted. Behind him, the other members all rushed up to me and said things like, “Hey, hey, hey, what do you mean? Why would we do that...” so I promised them:

“I will put an end to this case in the next 30 minutes.” I hadn’t brought lunch with me so I had to be back home by noon. “You can wait for 30 minutes, can’t you? Please endure it for a tiny half hour along with the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku.”

“The other Great Detective Tsukumojuukus said the same thing!” Abe said.

He seemed to be in charge of complaining within the group. I didn’t want to deal with that so I would silence him.

“Abe-san, Abe-san. Please look at me, just you, everyone else please look away. It’s dangerous,” I said, letting go of the hands that belonged to the man in front of me and taking my sunglasses off.

“The heck do you have with—aah!” Halfway through his sentence, he was moved by my beauty, raised both arms once again, took the pose of the ‘peasant applauding a miracle,’ and then collapsed on the floor. Another man and woman who didn’t pay heed to my warning also fell down while mumbling something.

I put my sunglasses back on. “It’s okay now, you can look this way.”

Everyone who hadn’t fainted turned around. They looked at Abe and the two others on the floor. The man in front of me looked at them, then faced me anew and said, “Oh, you might really be the ‘Great Detective Tsukumojuuku’ too. Look, everyone, isn’t this guy super beautiful?”

Everyone voiced their agreement.

“No need to fret for Abe, Kawabe, and Nakai, who went down,” the man said. “The other ‘Great Detectives Tsukumojuuku’ already made them faint so many times. Hahaha. Some people just can’t learn their lesson.”

“That’s the attractive power beauty has,” I said.

“Exactly,” he agreed and smiled.

The man’s name was Fukushima Manabu. The two who fainted

alongside Abe were Kawabe Keisuke and Nakai Sayaka. There were seven other male members: Kawai Kazuhiro, Hongou Takeshi, Tanaga Masatsugu, Kumono Takuya, Hoshino Masato, Aoyama Gen, Furutaka Masayuki. And seven other female members: Mizorogi Fumie, Kajiwara Ayako, Nomura Rie, Obata Aki, Nonaka Mami, Yoshida Yukino, Iwai Yumi. There were 19 Angel Bunnies in total. It should actually have been 20, but one of them, Higashimoto Mika, had been used for the *Castle of Illusions 1976 November Issue*'s cover where her face was painted green. Poor Higashimoto Mika.

I had the Angel Bunnies put me up to date on the situation. The Castle of Illusions' owner, Yanbe Tetso, had officially invited Tsutomu who had made a name for himself as a great detective. Tsutomu and Abe Atsushi were both part of the talent agency Angel Bunnies, and since the mysterious invitation from someone that rich got the other members curious, they tagged along with him...or rather, basically forced their way into the castle. Nearly 200 people in the publishing business were invited. There were also many Kodansha Novels authors, among which was the author 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' who vanished from everyone's sight on the very first day. Nobody had heard of anyone finding him.

Well, even so, I knew perfectly well where Seiryouin Ryuusui currently was.

Fukushima said that a few members from the JDC (= Japan Detective Club) were also invited. The president Ajiro Souji, the God of Detectives Tsukumo Juuku, and Hikimiya Yuuya. Rumors had it that they came to complain at Kodansha Novels' Seiryouin Ryuusui for writing books about the JDC without authorization. Others had it that they came to scout Tsutomu = Daibakushou Curry who was starting to get pretty famous. And in fact, Tsutomu was cooperating with the three JDC members in this case. But it didn't seem like they'd figured anything out yet. Ajiro Souji must be using all of his brains to think with his Expert Concentration, Tsukumo Juuku must be waiting around like an idiot for the necessary data to trigger his Divine Connection, and Hikimiya Yuuya must be gathering all sorts of data. And my prediction turned out to be right. Ajiro Souji was taking a rest

from his duty as a phone detective and brooded over the Castle of Illusions Case while Tsukumo Juuku was spending his days sleeping locked inside his room. Hikimiya Yuuya was the only one actively doing something. He went around the castle with a measuring tape and a birdwatch counter to figure out all sorts of numbers he was gleefully reporting, like that adding the numbers of chairs and beds on the castle's first floor gave the exact page number of Seiryouin Ryuusui's first Kodansha Novels book, *Cosmic*, that there were as many windows as there were occurrences of 'Tsukumo Juuku' in *Joker*, his second work, or that the total surface area covered by carpets was equal to the number obtained by adding the page counts from the *Carnival* trilogy books, which counted as the third entry in the series, with the advertisement pages included but not the illustrations, tables of contents, or appendixes. 'The Castle of Illusions really is full of nods to Seiryouin Ryuusui's novels,' he would say. Hikimiya Yuuya's next project was apparently to read all the books in the library and count the occurrences of various characters' names in them. Tsutomu was probably tagging along with him to make sure he was safe. He'd always been kind, after all.

Leaving the case to this JDC would merely result in more people dying for no reason, like in Seiryouin Ryuusui's Kodansha Novels books. They couldn't start the resolution without advancing on their deductions to some extent, but that was no reason to let the culprit run free. Also, I couldn't afford to be this slow.

I started. The important characters would show up when needed anyway.

"Look over there," I said, pointing at the altar, at the 39 dead women lined up. I explained that these were mitate of the *Castle of Illusions* magazine covers. The Angel Bunnies let out voices of surprise, but they didn't know much about the magazine so I offered some additional explanation: "*Castle of Illusions* was originally the title of an essay by Edogawa Ranpo, that's where the name comes from." *Hoh*. The Angel Bunnies didn't know about the 'Castle of Illusions' that appeared in Seiryouin Ryuusui's novels, so I informed them of that

too. “So it’s a European-style castle located in Kyoto. The owner is ‘Hirai Tarou.’ Hirai Tarou being Edogawa Ranpo’s real name. But the ‘Hirai Tarou’ who owns the ‘Castle of Illusions’ isn’t Edogawa Ranpo/Hirai Tarou. In *Joker*, Seiryouin Ryuusui’s second long-form novel, a serial killer calling themselves The Artist kills a bunch of people. So detectives from the JDC do their best to solve it. And that case takes place in that castle.” *Hoh. Did that case really happen?* “Of course not. This is merely what the author Seiryouin Ryuusui wrote in his novels. None of that has taken place in the world Seiryouin Ryuusui is a part of.” In the Kodansha Novels-published JDC Series there was a ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ character ‘writing the JDC Series,’ but that was something the real author Seiryouin Ryuusui included to complexify the structure of the books, it was nothing more than a diegetic truth that remained inside the novels. Fiction is fiction, and the real world is the real world. *But people from the JDC are actually here*, the Angel Bunnies argued. “These people are probably cosplayers who love pretending to be great detectives. They are simply waiting for the case to end. They will surely come up with something random once it ends.” *Something random? Like what?* “Words and numbers. You will always find a way to connect elements through anagrams, puns, and stretches. For example, from ‘words’ to ‘numbers.’ ‘Words’ is ‘kotoba’ in Japanese, written コトバ, but if you move the diacritic from バ to コ you get ゴトハ, which can be pronounced ‘gotoha’ or ‘gotowa,’ the latter meaning ‘what is five?’ And what is five if not a number? See? We can go the other way too. Take ‘number,’ ‘suuji,’ ‘数字,’ rewrite it with relevant kanji to make a homonym, like 崇辞, extrapolate meaning from each character—for example, here, the first one means ‘sublime’ or ‘revered’ while the second one means ‘words,’ which makes ‘genuine words,’ ‘words among words,’ ‘words without any impurity;’ in short, ‘words’—and you get to your destination. It’s effortless, it’s effronted, it’s fortress-solid.” *Come on, that’s just sophistry.* “If you do lots of these while focusing on a single theme it will sound more convincing. After all, there are an infinity of results you can get with anagrams and puns, all you need is to pick those relevant to your theme.” *Mhm.* “Well, the essence of the JDC Series

lies in these relentless anagrams and puns, and these people like it so much they cosplay as characters from it; there is no doubt they love wordplay as well." *But the Great Detective Tsukumo Juuku from the JDC made Abe faint all the damn time. Who could be that beautiful if not the real Tsukumo Juuku?* "Well, *I* am the real Tsukumojuuku. I am one and only. If anyone else claims to be Tsukumojuuku, they are fakes. We're running out of time, let's take a look at the culprit."

I then stood up, walked to the altar, wondered which box I should pick, took up Kusanagi Kyouko's head out of the *Castle of Illusions 1975 May Issue* box, and returned to the Angel Bunnies.

"Eh? What are you gonna do with that?"

"I will have her tell me the culprit's identity."

"...?"

Paying no heed to the perplexed Angel Bunnies, I took a knife out of my bag and started by gouging out her eyes. I then made an incision on the back of Kusanagi Kyouko's head, inserted the blade under her skin, cut the flesh apart from her skull while making sure not to tear any parts of it, took her skull out of Kusanagi Kyouko's full-face mask, and put it down on the floor, in front of the dumbfounded Angel Bunnies. Kusanagi Kyouko's face had started to rot after spending a few days here, it was putrid. But I couldn't be picky right now. I took a condom out of my bag, opened it, and wore it on my penis. The Angel Bunnies all screamed and got away from me. When I then put Kusanagi Kyouko's face on and swapped my eyeballs with hers, the girls ran all the way to the back of the chapel. I didn't mind. I couldn't afford to mind. My brain was bombarded with stimulus. These were the memories of Kusanagi Kyouko's climaxes I had thoroughly experienced yesterday, but one level more intense. My brain exploded. My crotch exploded. I ejaculated and ejaculated and ejaculated more inside the condom, it wouldn't stop, I kept ejaculating over and over and over, even when I ran out of semen I kept being bombarded with orgasms. I fell down to the floor and convulsed. I broke three ribs in my ecstasy. The pain easened the whirlpool of orgasms I was drowning in, but not enough. Kusanagi Kyouko had a lot of memories regarding sex. Way too many. I was on the verge of

fainting. But when I really was about to lose consciousness, the waves of ecstasy suddenly stopped and her memory from before dying started playing. I (Kusanagi Kyouko) was in Chofu. Near Shinagawa Street. Next to a field. It was night. There weren't many cars. It was silent. I could vividly hear that silence. I could feel the cold. I could smell the odor of damp soil emanating from the fields. Someone grabbed my arm. I looked back and saw Serika, a horrifying expression on her face. Her arms turned to a man's partway. She was wearing Ookubo Kengo's hands like gloves. I ran away. I got caught. I got kicked. Serika sat on my (Kusanagi Kyouko's) chest. Her face was still dreadful. She looked behind her. I heard, "Grab her legs!" An energetic "Yes!" replied. I saw a skinny man with long hair behind Serika. I saw his glasses. I saw his face. No doubt, that was Seiryouin Ryuusui.

The Kodansha Novels author Seiryouin Ryuusui restrained my (Kusanagi Kyouko's) legs, leaving ten marks with his fingernails.

I still remembered the sensation of Seiryouin Ryuusui's cold hands. The hardness of his nails digging into my skin. The pain.

I took the Kusanagi Kyouko mask off.

I had solved all the mysteries.

"Makes perfect sense. After all, he remains God inside the Castle of Illusions."

5

I tied the opening of the condom inflated to balloon-size by my semen and went to throw in it a garbage bin in a corner of the chapel. I then washed my hands with holy water. I also washed the blood off my head and face with it. I wiped my face and hands dry with a handkerchief before addressing the Angel Bunnies, who were carefully coming back to me:

"The culprit is the Kodansha Novels author Seiryouin Ryuusui."

When I said that, the angels protecting God intervened, "Stop it right here, Beast me." Ajiro Souji, Tsukumo Juuku, and Hikimiya

Yuuya came in. Also Daibakushou Curry, who certainly was not an ‘angel.’

However, I fretted not. *I* was the real angel, while Seiryouin Ryuusui was the real dragon and Ajiro Souji and Tsukumo Juuku the real two beasts. Hikimiya Yuuya was a poor soul who’d received the mark of both the dragon and the beast. I had a mission to slay the dragon.

The Great Detective Tsukumo Juuku who appeared here was exactly like me. His face was overly beautiful. Of course it would be. Both Michael and Satan were originally archangels serving God. The Tsukumo Juuku who appeared right now was bound to have the same face as me.

Tsukumo Juuku said, “I heard everything from the vestibule. Now is the time to give up on your foolish ambition of deceiving the people of this Earth.”

I said, “*You* should put a rest to your struggles, impostor.”

Tsukumo Juuku said, “Your God is the impostor. Can you tell me who bestowed upon you this mark?”

I replied, “What do you consider my mark to be?”

“This name, obviously,” Tsukumo Juuku answered. “This mark is a present from God.”

“Heh,” I snorted. “It seems you are not aware of the true meaning behind the name Tsukumojuuku. 九十九十九. Nine ten nine ten nine. This doesn’t represent any number. It is merely a word. Let me explain what it contains. ‘十’ is to be pronounced ‘to,’ meaning ‘and.’ So ‘九十九十九’ is ‘九 and 九 and 九.’ In other words, ‘999.’ That name is an inverted ‘666.’ You are the beast in possession of the number six hundred and sixty six that surges from the ocean at the end of times.”

“You were close,” Tsukumo Juuku said. “One more step and you would have fooled me. You would have fooled everyone. You might have even succeeded in having them worship your fake deity. But you are mistaken. God never errs. And the same goes for his servants—me. Let me enlighten you. Tsukumojuuku is indeed not a number. The ‘十’ are indeed pronounced ‘to.’ But you fool, how did you not take one more step towards God when you were so close? ‘To’ is ‘and’ = ‘&.’

Which also means ‘十’ is actually ‘＋.’ ‘九十九十九’ is ‘9 + 9 + 9.’

“9 + 9 + 9 is 27. But 27 is ‘二十七’ and ‘十’ is ‘＋,’ so it is actually 2 + 7 = 9. 9 + 9 + 9 = 2 + 7 = 9. The three nines become a single nine; this is a noble name meaning the alpha and the omega: the Trinity. How could I be an impostor with this mark as my name? And how could you be the real one when you couldn’t fully understand this name?”

I said, “Tsukumo Juuku, you con man attempting to deceive the ‘real one’ with word plays, then tell me, who is the God who engraved that so-called wonderful mark upon you?”

Tsukumo Juuku raised his arms and pointed with his finger. “It is that gentleman.” Tsukumo Juuku’s finger was pointing above the altar, at the Christ statue crucified to the cross.

I put on a smile. “Rub your eyes and take a better look, Tsukumo Juuku. Is that really your God?”

Tsukumo Juuku softly closed his eyes. “It indeed is. The person up there *is* my God.”

I said, “Take another look. That’s just a human. It’s the dead author Seiryouin Ryuusui.”

There was a cross fixed onto the wall behind the altar. However, the person crucified on it wasn’t Jesus Christ but the naked Seiryouin Ryuusui with a crown of laurel on his head. He was maintained there with two nails piercing the palms of his hands and one nail piercing both of his overlapped feet. He was also bleeding from his stomach where he seemed to have been stabbed by a spear. He was skinny, pale, and had long black hair; Seiryouin Ryuusui indeed looked just like Christ when looked at from afar on that cross. No wonder the Angel Bunnies hadn’t noticed despite being here for a while.

I asked, “Tsukumo Juuku, is that your God?”

Tsukumo Juuku answered:

“Yes, it is. That is my God.”

Alright, I thought. “How could that human be God?”

Tsukumo Juuku answered, “God exists in various forms. That is natural since God is the alpha and the omega. Even the Christian God isn’t the only form God has. And God currently exists in that form. It is not that Seiryouin Ryuusui is God—God is Seiryouin Ryuusui. And, having appeared as Seiryouin Ryuusui, God has embedded His divine essence onto him. This world was created by Seiryouin Ryuusui. Seiryouin Ryuusui is the one who invented, spread, and imbued words. Seiryouin Ryuusui is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Seiryouin Ryuusui is the Father who birthed this world, the Son who was born into this world, and the Holy Spirit guiding this world.”

He was probably referring to Seiryouin Ryuusui having created the JDC World, appearing inside it as the character ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui,’ and manipulating everyone from the shadows within that fictitious world. Fine.

Then I could ask this, “So, if I understand correctly, you are actively claiming that you are a fictional character created by the author Seiryouin Ryuusui, and that this Castle of Illusions and the whole world surrounding it is another creation of the author Seiryouin Ryuusui.”

Tsukumo Juuku nodded at that. “That is most exact. It is in your freedom to doubt that, but it is in no way the right thing to do.”

I said, “I, too, admit to being a fictional character created by an author. However, the fictional author who created me is not Seiryouin Ryuusui. I know that for a fact. I do not appear inside the JDC Series. Neither do ‘Daibakushou Curry’ or ‘Suzuki Tsutomu.’”

Tsukumo Juuku then said, “What are you saying, of course you do. Right here, as we are speaking.”

“This world isn’t the ‘JDC Series,’” I said.

“But it is equally a creation of the author Seiryouin Ryuusui,” Tsukumo Juuku said. “I have proof of it.”

Tsukumo Juuku produced Seiryouin Ryuusui’s *Episode One*, *Episode Two*, and *Episode Three*.

“You must have received those as well, haven’t you?” Tsukumo

Juuku said.

I solemnly nodded.

“Have you given them a read?” Tsukumo Juuku asked.

I nodded.

“So didn’t you read yourself appearing in them?”

I nodded, then said, “However, the character inside them is both me and not me. This is merely fiction written based on my experiences. I exist presently before your eyes, and therefore cannot exist within these novels.”

“But if you read them,” Tsukumo Juuku said, “*Episode One*, *Episode Two*, and *Episode Three* exist as independent worlds. Moreover, there is a continuity in *Episode Two* containing *Episode One*, and *Episode Three* containing *Episode Two*. Where could you find a guarantee that this world and you yourself won’t be absorbed inside of *Episode Five*? Can you prove that the events taking place here are not part of *Episode Four*?”

“I cannot,” I had no other answers. We were indeed in *Episode Four*. I was a character inside a novel. Even though my God wasn’t the author Seiryouin Ryuusui.

“And yet, God is dead up there,” I said, pointing at the Seiryouin Ryuusui crucified on the cross. “He is therefore incapable of writing *Episode Four*.”

“Listen to what you are saying,” Tsukumo Juuku said. “If this really is the fictional world of *Episode Four*, then, even with the character Seiryouin Ryuusui dying, the Seiryouin Ryuusui writing it is still alive. These doubts of yours were ultimately bestowed onto you by God Seiryouin Ryuusui to make you doubt.”

“You’re mistaken,” I said. “The real God who created this world is definitely not Seiryouin Ryuusui. I know that.”

“But do you *really* know that it isn’t Seiryouin Ryuusui?” Tsukumo Juuku said. “You might know God under a different name. But do you really not suspect that this might just be another name for Seiryouin Ryuusui? Do you *really* know that this God is what you believe it to be and is separate from Seiryouin Ryuusui? As an example, let’s imagine that the person appearing in public as Seiryouin Ryuusui was someone

completely unrelated who was merely hired to do that, and in reality the God that created us and the God you believe in are the same individual—can you not suspect that to be the case? Or the inverse, which is that the God you believe in created us under a different name, under the name 'Seiryouin Ryuusui'? Do you *really* know what God's face looks like?"

I looked at Seiryouin Ryuusui's face high up on the cross. He looked like Seiryouin Ryuusui. But he might have actually been my God wearing Seiryouin Ryuusui's skin like a bodysuit. My God might have died on that cross.

"Seek forgiveness from God," Tsukumo Juuku said. "O Dragon. You were born to suffer defeat by the hands of angels. You were born to be slandered as the beast bearing the number 666."

I replied, "And yet, if I really were the beast bearing the number 666, there should be a second one of me. A beast having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. A beast like unto a leopard, with his feet as of a bear, and his mouth as of a lion."

Tsukumo Juuku nodded. "The first beast summoned by the dragon, yes. He paid us a visit before you arrived here."

Prompted by Tsukumo Juuku's words, Hikimiya Yuuya ran into one of the vestibules and dragged out an overly-beautiful man with his hands cuffed behind his back. Even with his blindfold I could tell who that was:

Me.

Tsukumo Juuku produced yet another bundle of paper. He handed it to me.

Episode Five - Seiryouin Ryuusui

I skimmed through it. A timeslip. That's all I needed to know. I'd

traveled from *Episode Five* into the world of *Episode Four*. And I'd gotten caught by Tsukumo Juuku here.

Now there were three people with the exact same face in the same place. I could understand God's intent.

God had abandoned me and the other me, and intended on fusing us into the Tsukumo Juuku that was born from a different God. He intended on expressing the Trinity with that.

Tsukumo Juuku said, "I will miss you. But this world doesn't need three Tsukumojuukus. One is enough. Therefore I will now eat you two."

Tsukumo Juuku opened his mouth.

6

Surrounded by Angel Bunnies screaming, Tsukumo Juuku took a bite out of the blindfolded me.

"WOAAAH!" my little brother, Tsutomu, yelled. "Wait, hold on, onii-chan!" he said, however, to Tsukumo Juuku, who then bit me under my eyes. "Which one is the real onii-chan, damnit!?"

"It's me!" I said.

"Tsutomu, it's me," Tsukumo Juuku said. "These two are impostors. Don't get fooled."

"Don't get fooled!" I said. "He is the impostor! You and I possess the same God, Tsutomu! Believe in me!"

"I *have* to eat them here, Tsutomu," Tsukumo Juuku said. "They will follow me forever if I don't. They will keep trying to fool you."

"Just don't do anything for a second, you three!" Tsutomu said. "Don't move one inch until we get this situation sorted out!"

"Tsutomu! Help me!" The blindfolded me said as his cheeks were ripped apart from his face. "Help me!"

"Tsutomu. It's okay," Tsukumo Juuku said. "These two appeared here so I could eat them. This is the Trinity. They will become my blood, my flesh, and my bones. They will become one with me."

"Tsutomu! Help me!" the other me screamed.

I screamed, "Tsutomu! Believe in me! Our God is the same! He's not Seiryouin Ryuusui!"

“Tsutomu, search through your memory,” Tsukumo Juuku said. “What kind of person have I been? Haven’t I always been right? Who here has been the most right?”

Tsutomu went silent. Tsukumo Juuku used the occasion to take another bite at my face. I yelled in pain.

“I told you to stop that, onii-chan!”

Tsukumo Juuku paid no heed to Tsutomu and kept eating me. The other me was slowly getting eaten while screaming.

I ran towards the altar and jumped on it. I wanted to confirm the face God had on that cross. I wanted to confirm whether that was Seiryouin Ryuusui or my God.

Tsukumo Juuku addressed me with his mouth stained with my blood, “Do not misunderstand. Seeking God doesn’t mean getting closer to Him. Those who try the latter will see themselves punished.”

I said, “My God is definitely not Seiryouin Ryuusui!”

I knew that!

I solved the case behind the *Castle of Illusions* mitate. Most mitate aren’t set up for the sake of doing a mitate. They exist to accomplish a different goal.

I knew what that other goal was.

I had to transform this into yet another mitate. Otherwise this *Castle of Illusions* Magazine mitate alone wouldn’t serve any meaning.

I started moving the 43 boxes on the altar. Due to the composition of the covers and the portions of the girls used to recreate them, the boxes all differed in sizes. I piled them up from the biggest to the smallest. I erected a vertical stairway. Tsukumo Juuku tried to eat the other me while I was doing that, but Tsutomu intervened. “I told you to stop that! Onii-chan!”

Tsukumo Juuku brushed Tsutomu away. “Shut it Tsutomu, stay away! You will understand everything in time!”

“Stop bullshitting him!” I screamed while lifting a box. A girl’s head rolled off. “Tsutomu! Get his ass!”

Tsutomu tried to jump onto Tsukumo Juuku, but was easily repelled. “Sorry, could you keep my little brother in check for a moment?” Tsukumo Juuku said to Ajiro Souji and Hikimiya Yuuya,

who each twisted one of Tsutomu's arms behind his back.

"Let me go!"

"Curry-kun. Believe in the God of Detectives. Tsukumo Juuku's words are always correct," Ajiro Souji said.

"Hey!" I said. "I'm Tsukumojuuku too, you know!?"

"You are not," Hikimiya Yuuya said. "Curry-kun, only the most correct person is Tsukumojuuku."

"Tsuton!" the other me said. Tsukumo Juuku had eaten his cheeks and lips so he couldn't pronounce 'mu.' "I arh Tsukuojuuku too! I cain froh the future! I'n either this cannihal or the other ne who cain here froh the future!"

"It's a novel, Tsutomu," Tsukumo Juuku said. "He's from a novel set in the future. And yes, he did come from the future. But he's not me. He is the scoundrel trying to approach God on top of the altar. This guy came here from the future. But I only need to eat them both here. This is just a novel, there is no problem with eating both of them. Also, it seems like both stories exist independently of each other. Even this story will probably be removed from the canon. Though, of course, part of the setting will carry over to the next one. But that's completely fine. The me in the next story will not feel any pain whatsoever from this."

"Yes he will! It hucking hurts!" the lipless me said. "Hey, cannihal! Ehen you haf no idea what you'll eeh in the next world!"

"Tsutomu!" I screamed while building the stairway. "There is no necessity for him to eat us here! The Trinity doesn't have any meaning in this situation!"

The Angel Bunnies, trembling in fear, finally joined the fight. "Stop iiiiiit!" "Wait, wait, wait!" "No eating nobody!" Hongou, Hoshino, and Furutaka rushed to Tsukumo Juuku and attacked him. Tsukumo Juuku took an army knife out of his pocket and stabbed Hongou, Hoshino, and Furutaka, each in their right shoulders. "This is the mark I bestow upon you three," Tsukumo Juuku said. "I shall pray for God's blessing to be upon you."

I grabbed the last box and started climbing the stairway I'd created on the altar.

Tsukumo Juuku let go of the other me, ran over to the altar, said, “This is God’s ire!” and kicked the stairway.

I was only a few steps away from the God on the cross. But I actually knew this would happen. This stairway had to collapse. It was inevitable for this to become a mitate of the Tower of Babel. Some kind of divine punishment had to befell me for trying to approach God by erecting the Tower of Babel. The language I’d been using had to be changed, and the stairway I’d been building had to collapse.

I fell on my back from ten meters high onto the altar. I broke more ribs. One of them pierced through my lung.

At this rate it wouldn’t be long before I died. But I was still alive. And thus, I could see.

Furutaka and Hoshino, bleeding from their shoulders, stood up and started punching Tsukumo Juuku. Hongou joined them slightly later. The other Angel Bunnies, too—with the exception of Abe, Kawai, and Nakai, who were still unconscious—clenched their fists and attacked Tsukumo Juuku. In the commotion, the me who’d lost half of his face escaped from Tsukumo Juuku and climbed onto the altar, his hands still handcuffed behind his back.

Oh, the Angel Bunnies.

I had overlooked this. The ‘angels’ my God had prepared to fight the dragon.

I retrieved my faith in God.

I shouldn’t have doubted to begin with.

Now on the altar, the other me found a button behind the wall supporting the cross. When he pressed it, motors started moving under the altar and the entire wall holding the cross slowly came down. The cross was falling down to earth. God had fallen. A fallen God is not God.

“I can’t see anything with ai eyes flindfolded!” the blindfolded me screamed. I confirmed in his stead from the floor.

“It really was just Seiryouin Ryuusui. He’s dead. The poor soul.”

Poor Seiryouin Ryuusui.

The moment Seiryouin Ryuusui lost his standing as this world's God, what belonged to his worlds were ousted.

The three JDC detectives—Tsukumo Juuku, Ajiro Souji, and Hikimiya Yuuya—disappeared.

The Castle of Illusions disappeared too.

Tsutomu, the Angel Bunnies, and I were sleeping in the dead center of the plot where the Tokyo Stadium was planned for construction before we ever knew it. In the distance of this vast flatland, I could see a white curtain surrounding this place.

There were many people other than us, seemingly invitees to the castle. Nobody understood what was going on. But they realized that, at least, their torment had come to an end, and rejoiced over it. Among a group of people who appeared to belong to Kodansha Novels, someone was searching for Seiryouin Ryuusui, calling his name. "Ryuusui-saaaaan! It's me, Oota! Everything is fine now, you can come out~! Come on, we need to get *The Saimon Family Case* done! Else we'll have no shot of making it in time for this summer~..."

Seiryouin Ryuusui was no longer amongst us, but he was probably doing fine in various other places. So, Kodansha Novels staff, at least within this world, please continue searching for Seiryouin Ryuusui in vain.

Well, it should be fine for one such world to exist.

7

When the castle vanished, Yanbe Tetsuo, owner of the Castle of Illusions which turned out to be a literal illusion, fell from the topmost tower where he'd taken refuge alone.

The other people were fine so I didn't see the issue with having him live too, and yet he'd died.

As though he didn't want to hand the reward to me.

The prize money vanishing along with Yanbe Tetsuo, I was carried to the hospital where Umi, my mother-in-law, and my cute triplets

came to visit me.

Nobody blamed me for not obtaining the 30 million yen. I was relieved.

I couldn't quite tell if my God was kind or cruel. But seeing Umi and my mother-in-law both saying in tears they were happy I was okay and telling me how scared they were when the castle suddenly vanished, it made me feel like, all in all, this was far from the worst outcome.

I didn't know where Yanbe Tetsuo's spirit was, but I hoped he was having fun wherever he was. Life lasts 120 years. I thought I remembered Yanbe Tetsuo to be 63, so he still had the latter half to live. It must be tough spending 57 years straight rubbing against a pillar in someone's attic, so I hoped he would get bored of it and find another way of living.

Also, the other me.

...Well, he lived in a world under the same God as mine, so he should be able to find himself a warm environment.

I hoped this warmth would last for a long while.

Even though I knew full-well it wouldn't.

Episode 7

9+9+9

PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.

CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.

AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?

I'M OUT HERE ALONE

IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.

Maijo Otaro

1

The phone rang as my mother-in-law and I were feeding Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest some eel donburi. She answered it.

“Yes, I’m Tsushima. ...Mm? What is it? What happened? ...Do you hear yourself, are you okay? Why are you crying so—huh? What are you saying, Takako? Tsutomu-san is here with me. Eh? No, really. I swear. Hold on a second,” she said, turning to me, “Tsutomu-san, it’s Takako. Here,” she tossed the cordless phone at me.

I grabbed it and answered. “Yes?”

“Waaaah!” Takako suddenly cried into her phone. “Nghh, *sniff*, ughhh, nhn, Ts-Tsuto...mu? *Sniff*, Tsutomu? Mmhn, y-you really a-are Tsutomu, r-right?”

I nearly burst out laughing, but figured it wasn’t this kind of situation so I swallowed the laughter bubbling around my Adam’s apple and said, “Of course it’s me. Whose number do you think you composed?”

“Mmmhnnn, ghh, *sniff*, I, *sniff*, nhn, dummy. Gee, I... I was so, *sniff*, worried. I’m, mgh, *sniff*, nnhn, waaaah!”

“I don’t get what’s going on but calm down, no need to cry. What happened?”

“I-I thought you, nhmn, *sniff*, you d-died, *sniff*, I s-saw it, nhn, on the news. It said, mngh, t-that you died, I...waah, *sniff*, nhn...”

“On the TV?”

“Nhn. *Sniff*, u-ugh, on the net. Ngh, a n-news, *sniff*, website, nhm, on the internet, *sniff*, you get, nhn, what I’m talking about?”

“Yeah.”

“*Sniff*, mnnhn, those.”

“I get it, I get it. Well no, I still don’t know what’s going on, but I’ll boot up my laptop, okay? Hold on a second. Aren’t you at work right now? Is it okay for you to be on the phone?”

“I’m going home~,” Takako said before bursting into tears again, but I retained my laughter.

“Can you? I mean, doesn’t sound like you’re in the condition to do much anyway, so yeah, come back. I’ll call the company for you.”

“Mmmhnnn, *sniff*, ngh, *sniff*, nhm, no need, *sniff*, I told them...I was going home, *sniff*, early.”

“Oh, okay. Then I’ll be waiting for you. But you need to calm down. Let’s take deep breaths. Follow after me, breathe in...breathe out.”

Takako followed my instructions despite sobbing and having hiccups. “Haaaaah, *sniff*, haah, nhn, hooooo. ....Haaaah, *sniff*, haaah, hooooooo, *sniff*, hoooo.”

I booted up my laptop on the desk in the living room and connected it to the internet as I listened to Takako’s awkward breathing. The news. I didn’t need to search for long. ‘A Great Detective (?) Murdered—West Akatsuki, Fukui.’

West Akatsuki. A great detective.

It had to be this.

I clicked on that headline. The rest of the article appeared:

Was the person shot dead with an arrow a great detective? West Akatsuki, Fukui.

A murder case is currently taking place in the ‘Cross House,’ a religious building deep in the mountains of West Akatsuki, Fukui. We don’t know the details, but the self-proclaimed ‘great detective’ whose chest was pierced by an arrow at dawn on the ninth of September is a man calling himself ‘Tsukumojuuku.’ His identity has yet to be confirmed but the police are actively working on it.

Still, a great detective called Tsukumojuuku killed in a Cross House, this sounds like something straight out of a mystery novel. (Fukui Prefectural Newspaper, September 10th 1999, 12:05 PM)

“Hhhhhhhh,” hearing Takako expel air out of her lungs, I told her, “Okay, take your time coming home once you feel calm enough. I’ll be waiting here for you.” “Really? Please do, Tsutomu. Don’t move from there.” “Of course.” “It should take about 40 minutes if I take the train now.” “Yeah, I know. Just come home.” “Oka~y. You better be there!” “Yeah, I’ll be.” “I’ll be on my way.” “Yeah, be careful.”

“Tha~nks.”

The call ended.

I searched for ‘Cross House.’ I only got three results. All of them seemed to be articles from the Fukui Prefectural Newspaper.

A mysterious religious building on the mountainside.

A cross-shaped building was discovered in the mountains of Hiimagotani, a settlement in West Akatsuki, Fukui. The first to discover it was the owner of that mountain, Katou Takashi-san (39), who headed there to forage cedar branches. The police are hearing from Katou-san, but he seemed to be as surprised as anyone since he wasn’t aware of its existence. The building housed multiple bedrooms and showed traces of someone living there. It is suspected to be a Christian building due to the cross inside the chapel. The police are searching for the building’s owner. (Fukui Prefectural Newspaper, September 5th 1998)

Just about a year ago. Huh, I thought.

I turned the laptop off and returned to the eel donburi. Honest was spilling his food everywhere. He was the only one messy with food out of the three. At least he was careful not to drop the eel he loved so much. “Honest~, calm down when you eat, gee,” I said, picking up the food spilled on the table and eating it. I thought while eating. A Christian facility. It should soon be time for *Episode Seven* to arrive.

From reading the novels ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ had sent me: *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, also *Episode Five* and *Four* which arrived in the inverted order, and *Episode Six* which arrived just three days ago, I could tell that ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ knew quite a lot about me; he had written things that had happened to me in those. Seshiru and Serika killing Junko-san, Kurihara Yurika, and Ueda Naoko in *Episode One* did happen. Most of *Episode Two* was fictional, but it got the period Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were born right at least. The ‘Nagoya Serial Decapitation Case’ from *Episode Three* was a real case. It didn’t go like portrayed in the novel, but I had indeed arrested ‘Ookubo Kengo.’ However, I didn’t know anyone called ‘Satou Emiko’ and

neither Seshiru nor Serika appeared then. That case made me famous as a great detective in Nagoya, so I did move to Chofu, Tokyo, in fear of Suzuki-kun finding me, but most of *Episode Four* and *Five*'s contents were purely fictional. The only real part of *Episode Four* was that Midori Park's toilet and its surroundings were really clean, while *Episode Five* only got right the fact that a big fire occurred in Chofu. Since then, every time I saw Midori Park near the Tamagawa River I wondered whether Seshiru and Serika were hiding under the toilet...which was a real pain—needless to say, there were no cannibal twins hiding under the toilet there. I once entered one of the stalls but the toilet never came off and neither Seshiru nor Serika jumped out of it to eat me. The big fire in Chofu was a direct consequence of a so-called Armageddon, a big commotion that took place on message boards. Middle and high schoolers set buildings on fire one after the other, mainly around Chofu Station, which resulted in over a hundred households turning to ashes. Nearly 50 people got arrested for that, and that count was still growing by investigating their friends and such. The 'Dismemberment Case' from *Episode Five* also happened, but it was just a traffic accident that took place on the Keio Line near Chofu Station. It was, of course, nothing like described in the novel. A girl who was run over by a train and lost everything below her belly button still managed to crawl out of the tracks plus move an additional 120 meters in her house's direction—that was the whole case. It was certainly a dreadful story, but I actually felt relieved when I heard about it. It showed that, even if a train were to run over us, even if we were to lose everything below our hips, even if all our organs were spilling out of us, if we did our best, we could still get out of the tracks and crawl for another 120 meters. That's a long distance. Long enough to see many things and think about many things. Though, of course, I had no idea what Nakata Yuuko actually saw and thought about as she traveled from the Keio Line's railway crossing to the Chofu Ginza District then down Koshu Avenue for about ten meters on the sidewalk in front of the bank.

I finished eating the eel donburi and thought.

I didn't understand what 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' expected from me by

sending me these novels. I didn't understand why *Episode One* through *Episode Six* constantly had mitate of *Genesis* and *Revelation to John*. But seeing the news of a 'Tsukumojuuku' being killed in a mysterious Christian facility in West Akatsuki at this specific timing made me feel like they had to hold some meaning. I was being invited. I could tell. Someone was trying to lure me into West Akatsuki. That was probably the person claiming to be 'Seiryouin Ryuusui.' And they had killed someone with my name. I didn't understand why they were trying to get my attention by doing this. Either way, they had killed 'me.'

Maybe that was a notice. Maybe 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' killing 'Tsukumojuuku' was a mitate of the Kodansha Novels author Seiryouin Ryuusui killing the God of Detectives he had himself created. However, I didn't know what meaning there was in a mystery novel author killing their series' central character, nor what it was meant to convey to me.

The only thing I knew for sure were that the Kodansha Novels author Seiryouin Ryuusui wasn't the same 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' who was sending me these novels (according to Oota Katsuki from the Kodansha Third Literary Department, Seiryouin Ryuusui had been focusing on the writing of *The Saimon Family Case* for the past few years, had written a few other works in the meantime, and was under the surveillance of multiple editors, so there was absolutely no way he could have written *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Four*, *Five,* and *Six*) and that killing 'Tsukumojuuku' wasn't enough to make me go back to West Akatsuki.

According to Heisuke-san, 'Tsukumojuuku' had been a name given to overly beautiful people like me since ancient times. So the Kodansha Novels Seiryouin Ryuusui must have named his detective that for the same reason. And the great detective killed in West Akatsuki must be overly beautiful too, like me. There had to be Tsukumojuukus all over Japan. Even if one of them were to be abducted and killed in West Akatsuki, I would ignore it. It was futile to try getting me back to West Akatsuki with that. I was living in Chofu as Tsushima Tsutomu. I didn't care about West Akatsuki or Tsukumojuuku anymore.

I washed the eel donburi bowls then played with Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. They were obsessed over the big flying wheel game lately. It consisted of me holding them up with both hands and spinning them around, but they kept asking me over and over to do it more, and since they were triplets I was constantly spinning around with no time to rest. I would love to let my mother-in-law do it, but she once dislocated Sincere's wrist and the triplets stopped asking her to do the big flying wheel ever since. I spun Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest around three times each, got dizzy, and fell onto the floor. "I can't..." I said, but the three of them wouldn't allow me that. "More!" they said, climbing on my body. "You're heavy," I complained, but they didn't take it seriously and lay down on me, from top to bottom: Tolerant, then Sincere, then Honest. "More, more, more!" By the way, the first word they'd learned was 'more.' I suggested playing hide-and-seek, but to no avail. "No! Spin, more~." "Dad, get up, now~." "Do the spin~." Honest gnawed on my shoulder. "Ouch, ouch, ouch. Stop that, Honest," I scolded him, but he just laughed it off, showing no remorse. When one of them did something, the other two imitated him. This time was no exception; Tolerant and Sincere followed his lead and started gnawing on me. Honest returned to gnawing too, so now I was being bitten and eaten by three children. It hurt quite a bit. *Gnaw, gnaw, gnaw*. I wondered if 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' was watching me from somewhere and would use it in his novels.

Honest plunged his fingers in my right eye and took it out, so I scolded him, "Hey, how many times do I have to say this? Don't remove people's eyeballs!" which caused Honest to throw my right eyeball into the living room where it disappeared under the sofa. When I was chasing after Honest, who took flight, and caused Sincere and Tolerant to also chase me, Takako came home.

"Welcome back!"

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest loudly ran to the entrance and said, "Oh, it's mom!" "Welcome!" "Wellllcome~." Takako joined me in the living room, bringing the triplets along with her.

"Welcome," I said.

"Thanks," she said, not as overjoyed at seeing me alive like I'd

thought she would be. Her expression was gloomy. She was thinking. She had been thinking about something for the entire time it took her to come home after that phone call. And she was still thinking.

“My, so you really came back,” my mother-in-law entered the living room and said. “What happened?”

“Well,” Takako said and looked at me. “I just wanted to talk to Tsutomu about something.”

She was still thinking. She hadn’t gathered her thoughts yet. And yet she was trying to put them into words.

“I don’t mind,” I said. I thought it would be better if she sorted out her thoughts first, but didn’t say it out loud.

We left the triplets in their grandmother’s care and headed out for a walk. They wanted to come with us, so I told them, “We’re going to the tatami store,” and they quickly returned to my mother-in-law. They didn’t like Igera-kun, the male cat of the store’s owner we were on good terms with. Takako and I left the house. We intuitively strolled in the direction of the Tamagawa River. We always headed there when we wanted to discuss things. I checked Takako’s face through my sunglasses as we walked: she was silently thinking about something.

Maybe she was afraid I would suggest going back to West Akatsuki after seeing the news of that case and was trying to find the words to keep me here. If so, I would tell her she didn’t need to worry, I wouldn’t go back. I was better off away from West Akatsuki.

But what Takako said while looking at kids playing soccer in the corner of her eyes when we arrived at the Tamagawa River’s shore was the complete opposite of what I’d been thinking.

“Tsutomu. You see, I think it’s time for you to go back to West Akatsuki.”

“Why do you think so?”

“I mean, Tsutomu, you’re Tsukumojuuku. You’re actually Tsukumojuuku. So I think it’s time for you to go and figure out the truth.”

“By that you mean getting along with the Katou household?”

“That’s part of it.”

“But there’s Suzuki-kun, remember. She’s still in jail, but there’s always the possibility that she will come for me.”

“Yeah, but like, what can we do about it? I want you to sort things out with Suzuki-san too.”

“The situation is all sorted. I will not return to Suzuki-kun’s side.”

“Yes, I’m not telling you to visit her in Kyoto, am I? You can slowly resolve things with her eventually. For now, how about you go to Fukui and meet with Tsutomu-san? And solve today’s case, the two of you. Well, I doubt Tsutomu-san waited for you before heading there. Since he’s a great detective too.”

“Then we can leave it to him. He’ll be alright. Tsutomu is a smart guy.”

“That won’t do. I’ve been thinking a lot. That ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ person sent all these novels to us, right? Reading them made me think that, with *Episode Six* over, there’s only Joseph’s part left for the *Genesis* mitate, no? And for the *Revelation to John* mitate, there’s only the first six seals, no?”

It wasn’t explicitly explained in *Episode Six*, but there was a scene where I pretended that Tsutomu won against me with his deduction—that was a mitate of Jacob fooling his older brother Esau. Likewise, the scene with the Angel Bunnies character who reappeared in *Episode Six* entering spheres of twelve, six, three, and eighteen meters in diameter, respectively called Sun, Moon, Star, and Wormwood, and destroying buildings and train stations by rolling them all around Chofu were mitate of the seventh seal being open, of the calamity from the fourth angel’s fourth trumpet, and of the calamity from the third angel’s third trumpet. Furthermore, the moment when the Sun and Wormwood balls, which were bouncing around and crushing Chofu, collided on the banks of the Tamagawa River and ceased to move were mitate of the calamity from the second angel’s second trumpet, and the big fire that spread in Chofu after that and was put out by the hail that fell from the house was a mitate of the calamity from the first angel’s first trumpet.

Takako was correct, ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ only had the mitate of the first six seals being opened left to write.

“Tsutomu, do you think this will just end up being a novel?” Takako asked. “Do you think that ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels will continue with *Episode Seven*, *Episode Eight*, and so on until the *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* mitate are all done, and simply end there? Do you think it will just come with an afterword like a normal book?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know you don’t. But you’ve been living your life leaving things you don’t understand as is, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. But—”

“But things you don’t understand are things you don’t know, and no matter how hard you try, you will never understand those—right? I’ve heard that a million times. Our knowledge is limited so there are bound to be limits to what we understand, and you can feel where your boundaries are, is it? I get that. Even so…”

“When I resolve a case as a great detective I do so within the bounds of my understanding, but that doesn’t cause any harm, does it?”

“I’m not talking about cases. I’m talking about something broader.”

“Broader, like what?”

“Well, all sorts of things. Like this world.”

“True, I barely know anything about the world. There are many things I don’t understand. There’s no shortage of them.”

“No. I’m talking about something more narrow, like you and I living together, me, our children, or my mother.”

“Mm? What do you mean?”

“If you don’t get it I want you to think about it.”

“Well, I don’t get it so I want you to tell me.”

“You’re not listening to me again. ***I*** want you to think about it, Tsutomu. I’m saying you should think for yourself.”

“But that won’t achieve anything. The only things I don’t get are things I don’t know. And no matter how much I think, I won’t get to know those.”

“Why do you always give up so quickly? Why? Why are you so pessimistic and quick to give up when I’m asking you to do something,

Tsutomu? Where is your love, Tsutomu?!"

"It's in my heart right here."

"Then use that! Use your love like I'm doing right now and make that brain of yours work! That's what I'm asking of you!"

"How should I do it?"

"Don't ask others just because you don't know!"

Takako then hugged me. She put her arms around my neck and hugged me tightly. Her small shoulders were pushing against my cheeks, but they were soft and didn't hurt. I could smell the guava-like scent from Takako's perfume. I could smell a fresh scent coming from her luscious hair. The scarf wrapped around her suit's collar gently tickled my nose.

"Remember this," Takako said, "this is me. Never forget this. This is me."

"Okay," I answered, unsure what to say.

Maybe Takako was actually hurt by reading me going out and having sex with other girls in these novels, I thought.

"I'm scared," she said, hugging me, before shedding a few tears.

"What are you scared of?" I asked.

"Losing you," she said.

"You won't lose me," I told her.

Takako shook her head, rubbing it against my shoulder.

"I'm scared of you not coming back. I'm scared. I'm so scared. It's too much..."

Takako was afraid of something.

I wanted to dispel that fear.

"Takako, I'm still not sure I understand, but...setting that aside, you think I should go back to West Akatsuki, right?"

"Yeah. I do."

"You think I should go there and solve 'Tsukumojuuku's' murder, right?"

"..."

Takako rubbed her forehead against my shoulders again, this time to nod.

"Do you think I'll understand more about this world by doing so?"

She turned her head sideways on my shoulder, away from me, sniffled, then said, “I said the world, but I don’t mean all of it or even close to that. Just what’s around you... Yeah, pretty much that.”

“That includes you.”

“...Yeah.” Still looking away, Takako sniffled. “Also Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.”

“Mother-in-law too?” I said, giggling.

Takako laughed too. Her shoulders moved up and down below my nose. “I doubt there’s much work to do on my mom’s side, though.”

“And you will stop being scared once I understand all of that, right?”

Takako moved away from me at my words. She was now facing me.

“No. The opposite. I’m scared of you understanding that. I’m really scared of that, okay? I’m actually scared of you heading to Fukui.”

“Then shouldn’t I not go and stay here?”

“No. It’s really time for you to go there. Tsutomu, how old are you now?”

“Sixteen.”

“See? And you’ve been taking good care of Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, haven’t you?”

“Of course. I mean, I’m their dad.”

“Exactly. You’re already a full-fledged father. That’s why I think it’s important for you to go back there. With Suzuki-san coming later.”

“...I don’t really get it. But okay. Sure, I’ll go. You’re coming too, right?”

“I won’t.”

“Eh? Why?”

“It’s something you need to do on your own.”

“But I want to introduce you and the triplets to my family while I’m at it.”

Takako hugged me again.

“I love you, Tsutomu. I really do. I love you with all my heart. I seriously love you, Tsutomu. I wouldn’t be able to live without you, Tsutomu. I really really love you, I love you lots.”

I almost felt like laughing. I was about to say, “Then let’s go to Fukui together,” but Takako first said, “Don’t forget this. I love you, Tsutomu. That’s why I’m sending you there alone. My love is pushing me to have you go to Fukui alone and solve the case on your own. I’m saying all of this because I sincerely, truly love you, Tsutomu, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do your best, Tsutomu. Don’t lose.”

“To what?”

“Everything,” Takako said. “To everything. Don’t lose, Tsutomu. You must win. You must win and come back. I will wait for you here.”

“Okay.”

I would win against that something and come back here at all costs.

“Tsutomu, there’s a bench over there, let’s go sit down.”

Takako grabbed my hand and took me to the log-shaped bench on the riverside. We sat next to each other, and Takako returned to resting her face on my shoulder before saying, “Take your sunglasses off. Take them off, make me faint, and go straight to Fukui.”

The weather was still warm in September, but even so, I couldn’t leave an unconscious girl alone on a bench next to a river.

“Think of the danger,” I said.

“Don’t worry.” Still leaning against me, Takako took her cell out of her suit pocket and made a call. Her hair fluttered in the wind and covered my face. I let it happen. Her graceful hair bent on my face and flowed alongside my ears as guided by the wind. The scent of guava. Takako’s scent.

“Ah, mom? I’m at the Tamagawa River, I’ll take a nap right now so come pick me up. Eh? Yeah, it’s all clear. Tsutomu will now head to Fukui. Yeah, for the case. I don’t know. But I bet he’ll come back right away. Yeah. Welp, I’m off to sleep, waiting for you. Bye.”

Takako ended the call, put her phone away, passed her arms around my back, and hugged me with all her strength once more. Her forehead was digging into my chest. Her shoulders then started trembling—she was crying.

“Tsutomu... I love you, Tsutomu. Why aren’t you saying that you

love me?"

"But I love you, Takako."

"How much?"

"Ten times more than you do."

"Not a hundred?"

"A thousand times more."

"Pfft," she laughed but was still sniffling. "You don't. Actually *I* love you a million times more than you do."

"Hmm."

"Hey, you're probably confused at why I'm crying and maybe you find it a bit humorous, but I'm serious. Tsutomu, come back to me as soon as you solve that case in Fukui."

"Okay."

"Aaahh..." Takako groaned, poking at my jaw with the top of her head, then suddenly said, "Actually, no, don't go. I don't want you to go away."

I laughed. "Then just come to Fukui with me."

"But that would be wrong," she said, looking up. An awkward smile beneath her teary, wet eyes, she took my sunglasses off.

"Takako!"

"Keep my face in your memory forever, Tsutomu. I love you. Be sure to come back to me. Don't lose. Win..."

Takako's smile turned gentle and warm as her mouth blankly opened and she collapsed onto my chest. I rested her head on my lap and stroked her hair as I waited. Eventually, I noticed my mother-in-law beyond the boys playing soccer on the river bank. She was holding hands with Tolerant. Tolerant was holding Sincere's, and Sincere Honest's hand. My family. We had all reunited on the Tamagawa River's banks by chance. Realizing this made me feel tight in my chest. I lifted Takako's head, moved my hips away, and gently put her head down onto the bench before standing up.

I thought: If I were to meet Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest face to face, I wouldn't be able to leave for Fukui. I wouldn't be able to leave my toddlers in the care of the girl who kept telling me she loved me.

I waved at my family.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest spotted me and started running straight at me. “Daaaad!” I heard a faint voice calling for me. The boys playing soccer stopped the ball upon noticing the three small children entering the court. Though the three didn’t seem to take notice of that mindfulness. The children running straight across the soccer court were my triplets. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Their stubby steps made them look cute, even though they were simply running. An image of the small Tsutomu flashed in my mind. When he was playing with me, and we would run around our small bedroom in the basement, just the two of us. He was just as cute as Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were now.

Do you think this will just end up being a novel? Takako’s question resurfaced in my mind. There were still parts of *Genesis* and *Revelation to John* the mitate hadn’t covered. ‘Tsukumojuuku’ had been killed this morning. In ‘West Akatsuki.’ In the ‘Cross House.’ I recalled. *Episode Four* had a cross too. The author Seiryouin Ryuusui was crucified on it. And the ‘God of Detectives Tsukumojuuku’ appeared there too. I didn’t get what this congruity meant. Takako had told me to think about things I didn’t understand.

I had to go there in order to think.

I looked at Takako, unconscious on the bench.

Takako had thought that the ‘Tsukumojuuku killed in West Akatsuki’ was me. The words ‘West Akatsuki’ and ‘Tsukumojuuku’ would only intersect for me.

Then other people might make the same mistake upon hearing those words. They might take me for dead, like Takako had done.

So might Tsutomu.

I thought: If ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels were to not end as mere novels, the remaining mitate might start happening in the real world starting now. ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ might be planning on having my Tsutomu be a mitate for one of the seals and kill him. And ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Four*, *Five*, and *Six* might be a reaaaaally long and complex notice that this would happen.

Tsutomu.

I recalled. I had promised to Tsutomu. Upon leaving the Katou

house's basement in West Akatsuki, when the small Tsutomu was begging me in tears not to leave, I had promised I would pay him a visit from time to time. I hadn't fulfilled that promise even once.

I had to go meet Tsutomu.

I had to show him that I hadn't died at all in the Cross House and was still alive.

I put my sunglasses back on and waved once more to Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. They were running at me while having fun with each other. I started walking away while waving at the three of them. I started running east down the river. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest began chasing after me with big smiles on their faces. I faced ahead and sped up. I could hear my three sons call for me from behind in the distance.

"Daaaad! Waaait!"

They called for me again and again and again—the more they did the more tearful their voices became. But I didn't look back. I would stop running if I did.

I could leave the triplets in my mother-in-law and Takako's care. Apparently, there were things I ought to do first.

I had to go to 'West Akatsuki.' I had to go to the 'Cross House.' I had to confirm that 'the dead Tsukumojuuku' wasn't me. I had to meet 'Tsutomu.' Also the 'mitate' and 'congruity.'

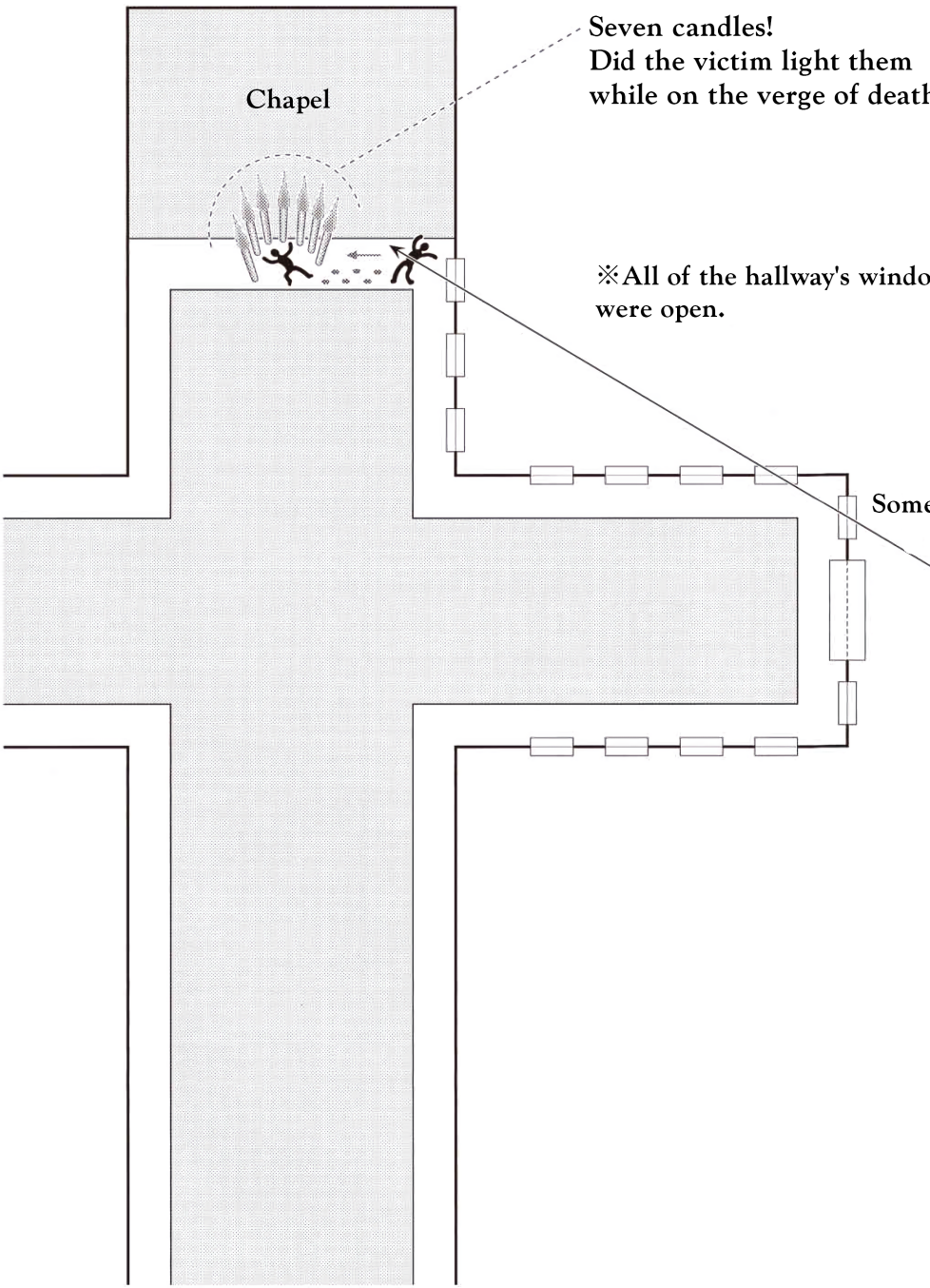
So stupid. I would get all of that done in a heartbeat and head back to Chofu as soon as I could.

However, I was already running late.

Tsutomu had been killed in the Cross House. He had headed there as Daibakushou Curry, solved the mystery within the day, and turned into a corpse when nobody was looking.

Tsutomu's deduction:

Cross Hous


Chapel
Seven candles!
Did the victim light them
while on the verge of death
※All of the hallway's windo
were open.
Some

Tsutomu was found crushed to death by a giant, one-meter-wide ball of steel outside of the chapel by a window. Next to him was a basketball covered by linen fabric and a volleyball painted entirely in red.

And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth.

So Tsutomu had the bad luck of being hit by the 'stars of heaven.'

Were the meteorite and meteor from *Episode Two* and *Five* a notice this would happen?

I couldn't tell. I didn't understand.

2

Even without understanding, I cursed God.

I cursed God for killing Tsutomu.

Out of grief, despair and resentment, I took both my right and left eyeballs out, threw them onto the ground, and stepped on them with my right foot, crushing them. My right and left eyeballs turned flat. They turned useless. But I could still see everything.

"Gajobun."

I turned back upon being called and found the nostalgic Seshiru and Serika. They had both grown beautiful. They were shiny. Dazzling, even. They had always been pretty children, but now their inner beauty had surfaced and taken over their outward appearance too. And yet Tsutomu had been crushed and I couldn't tell what he looked like. With his skull cracked open, his brain leaking out, and his face overturned, I couldn't tell how handsome he had become.

"So you're alive...okay, now I get it," Seshiru said. "I've solved the mystery."

Next to the Katou house in Hiimagotani, West Akatsuki, Fukui, further down the gravel path, a bit into the mountain, was the workshed where Junko-san's corpse had been found. Further down that same path deeper into the mountains, the car-friendly path eventually stopped. Even further, up a mountain path, there was a steel tower. Going north-east from that tower through cedar trees, away from any paths, landed you there: The Cross House. There was a plate with 'CROSS HOUSE' written on it above what appeared to be the front door. The Cross House was a colossal wooden cross lying flat atop a small hill. The base of the long vertical axis stopped just before a precipice at the end of the hill. When viewed from the base of that axis, the countless cedar trees down the cliff made it seem like the mountainside was undulating.

The Cross House had entrances on both extremities of the horizontal bar and at the base of the vertical bar. Either of them initially led you to a hallway going all the way around the individual rooms. The hallways and rooms were entirely made out of wood, so it had the atmosphere of an old school. The floor and walls were worn down, clearly due to many people living there. The building stood well against the rain and wind—which indicated that someone must have been climbing the mountain, making sure not to leave a path behind them, and taking care of the house until recently.

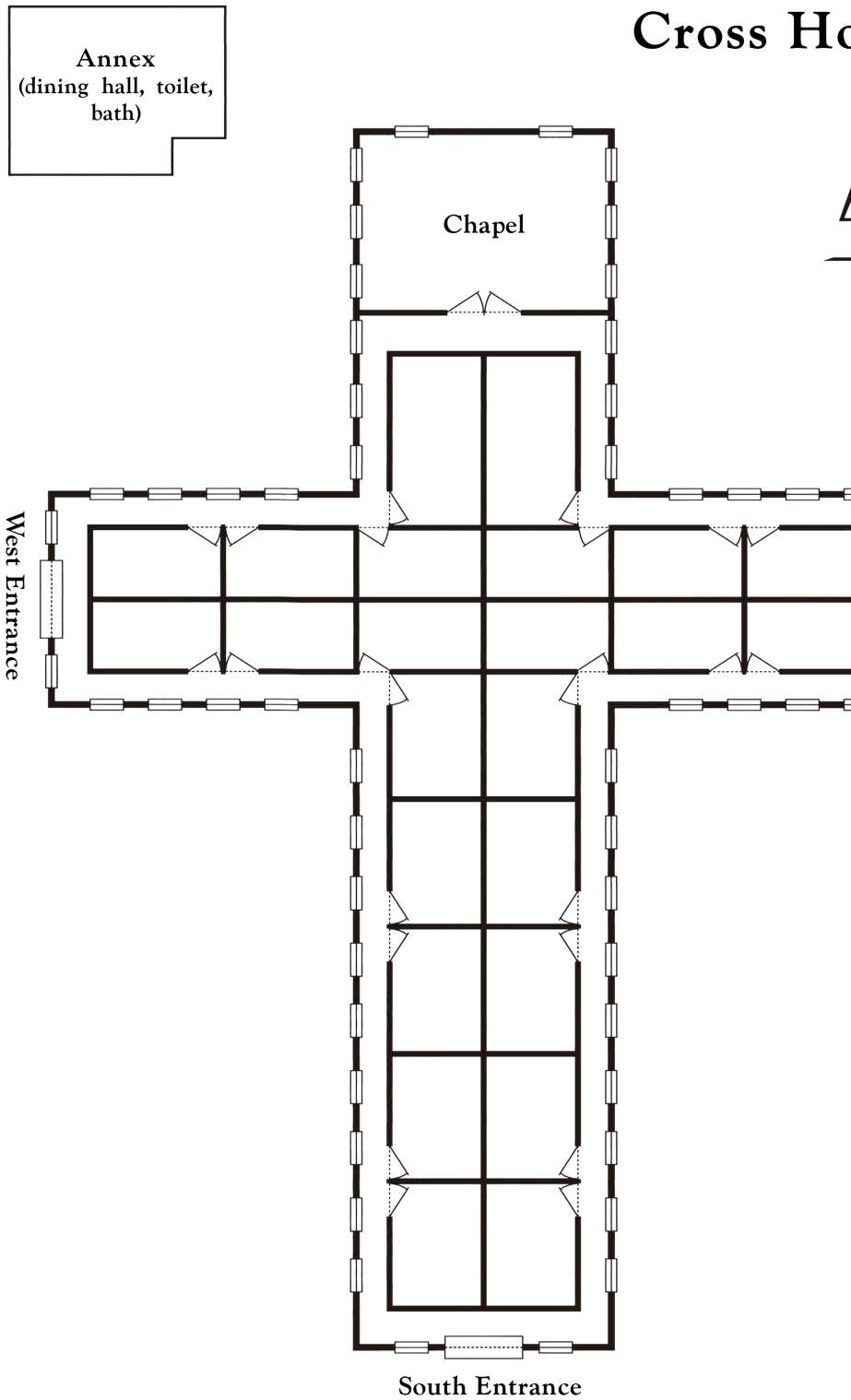
The Katou household had taken care of it for the past year. But maybe they had been maintaining it even before that. I didn't know.

That caretaker must have been cleaning the house, drying the sheets, and ventilating the house. Despite being old, all the rooms were clean, polished, and dried; they felt like a hotel.

The 24 rooms inside the Cross House only had a bed, a bookshelf, a desk, and a closet each. The toilet, baths, and dining hall were outside of the house.

The chapel situated atop the Cross House's vertical axis was quite small. It had two rows of 14 four-person pews facing an altar with a pulpit in front and a cross in the center. There was no Christ on it.

Cross Ho

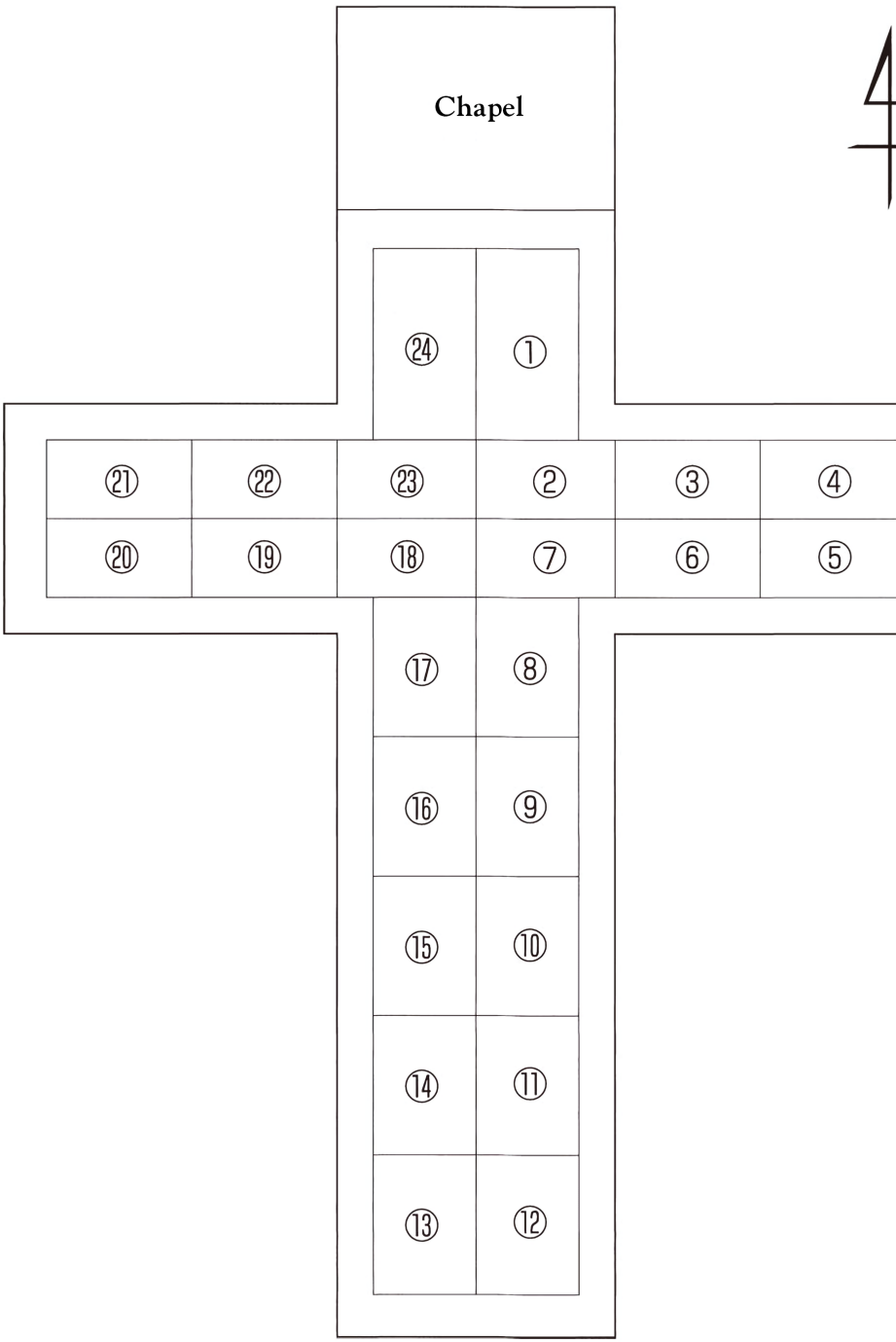

Annex
(dining hall, toilet, bath)
Chapel
West Entrance
South Entrance

At around eleven in the morning on the ninth of September, Takashi-san entered the mountain to cut some cedar branches, and checked on the Cross House while he was at it. That's because the house had had visitors for the past two weeks. They were staff from the Shibuya-based movie production company Angel Bunnies. Abe Atsushi, belonging to that company, had asked Takashi-san to let them use the Cross House as a location in their project. Having filmed for their movie based on the Ayatsuji Yukito Kodansha Novels-published *The Cross House Murders* until dawn, the Angel Bunnies were still asleep when Takashi-san arrived at the Cross House, so instead of finding those Tokyo people's movie set, he found me, who had no reason to be there, dead, despite having no reason to be. There were seven candles on the ground in the middle of the corridor in front of the chapel's open double doors. Surrounded by these seven tiny flames, which were still burning at the time of discovery, was me—naked, pierced by an arrow, and dead.

Skylight

Seshiru gathered everyone in the chapel, said, “Let me check everyone’s alibi around the time period of eleven in the morning one last time,” and started asking questions. He placed the whiteboard he’d borrowed from the Angel Bunnies on the pulpit, drew the Cross House, attributed each of the 24 rooms a number in clockwise order, and wrote the name of the person using each room as well as their alibi underneath it.

Cross Hou



① Hongou Takeshi → Was sleeping.

② Tanaka Masatsugu → Was checking the script. He left his room a few times and knocked at Hongou (①)'s door, right next over, to wake him up so he could help with the read-through.

③ Kumono Takuya → Was updating their internet homepage.

④ Yoshida Yukino → Woke up at around half past ten, changed clothes, left her room at quarter to eleven to wash her face, left the building through the east entrance, walked north and passed behind the chapel to get to the annex, met Mizorogi there, finished washing her face, and returned to their respective bedrooms together with Mizorogi by taking the same route back at around eleven o'clock.

⑤ Hoshino Masato → Was sleeping.

⑥ Aoyama Gen → Was sleeping.

⑦ Mizorogi Fumie → Almost identical to Yoshida (④). Met her at the annex, washed their faces together, and went back to their bedrooms.

⑧ Kawijara Ayako → Was sleeping.

⑨ Nomura Rie → Was sleeping.

⑩ Obata Aki → Woke up at around ten to eleven, knocked at Nonaka (⑪)'s door but didn't get a response, so she returned to her room, changed clothes, tried waking Nonaka a second time at around quarter past eleven but to no avail, so she went on knocking at Nomura (⑨) and Kajiwara (⑧)'s doors but both of them were sleeping, so she left through the east entrance alone, went around by the north, and washed her face at the annex before returning to her room through the same route at half past eleven.

⑪ Nonaka Mami → Was sleeping.

⑫ Kawai Kazuhiro → Was sleeping.

⑬ Fukushima Manabu → Was sleeping.

⑭ Abe Atsushi → Woke up at half past ten, made three separate trips to knock on Iwai (⑯)'s door so they could go wash their faces together, but he wouldn't wake up so he returned to his bedroom and fell back asleep at eleven o'clock.

⑮ Furutaka Masayuki → Was sleeping.

⑯ Iwai Yumi → Was sleeping.

⑰ Nakai Sayaka → Was doing her morning exercise.

⑱ Kawabe Keisuke → Was drawing a storyboard.

⑲ Higashimoto Mika → Was sleeping.

⑳ Satou Kazuhiro → Was on the internet. There are records of posts made on Voice of Heaven.

Taniguchi Tohru → Push-ups.

Hanada Sawako → Was on the phone with her dad back at Fukuoka. There are logs of it.

Hiraki Takako → Was sleeping.

Storage room

After writing all of that, Seshiru put the whiteboard down and said, “Okay, thank you everyone. Now, something changed in this room. Can you tell me what?”

Despite being surprised at Seshiru not commenting at all on their alibis, the 23 Angel Bunnies looked around the chapel from the pews they were seated on. “Huh, what could it be?” “The heck?” they commented while searching for the ‘change’ solicited by Seshiru, but nobody found anything. I was looking at Serika so I knew. Seshiru gave a hint: “If you don’t know, try asking god.”

“...Aah!”

They all gasped, with some also laughing.

Thanks to Serika, there was now a statue of Christ on the cross that had been empty so far. She had attached a Christ onto the cross in the back while everyone had their attention focused on the whiteboard.

“This is the statue of the Passion of Christ you had prepared for your movie,” Seshiru said. “It’s pretty well-done, I’ll give you that. Now, let’s go back to the alibis.”

He propped up the whiteboard on the pulpit.

“Well...” he said, scrutinizing the Angel Bunnies in the audience, then shrugged. “Actually nah, it’s a pain, let’s not.”

He put the whiteboard down again.

“Ehh!? What the hell?” Abe said. Hongou laughed at him and pointed out, “Man, you really suck at observing, huh. Use your eyes.”

“Huh? What? What are you... OH! Ohhhh, the fuck, you guys seriously saw that? I had no clue,” Abe was in awe.

The Christ statue on the cross had been switched. Christ—with his pale skin, the laurel crown on his head, his hands and feet nailed, a spear piercing his stomach, and blood flowing out of his wounds—had been replaced by another man’s doll. That pale and skinny long-haired man spreading his arms out looked identical to Aoyama Gen. Both in its stature, its skin color, and its face.

“W-w-wait what? Why is *my* doll up there? Come on, don’t use it for pranks, it’s for the movie~,” Aoyama complained.

“And it was also for the murder,” Seshiru said.

Seshiru presented his deduction:

“This cross didn’t have a Christ originally, but you hung one on it during the shooting. Because, of course, having a Christ statue will make for a more ‘authentic’ atmosphere. On the other hand, Aoyama-san’s was made for when his character would be killed in the movie *The Cross House Murders*. The plan was to have it hang on a branch in the cedar forest. But look closely. As demonstrated by Abe-san having trouble spotting the switch, the Christ statue and Aoyama’s doll are really similar. They have the same stature, skin color, expression, and they even bleed from the same spots.”

Seshiru took the wig off Aoyama’s statue.

“Only their haircuts differ.”

Hearing that, I thought of a homonym to ‘haircut,’ *kamigata*, ‘the shape of God.’ Their God differed in shapes. Gods of differing shapes are not God.

Seshiru continued.

“The culprit hung Aoyama’s doll on the cross instead of the Christ statue. They then waited for the supervisor they’d called for the movie, the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku, to arrive.”

That was me yet not me. It was another me. Though I didn’t know why there was one more of me.

If you don’t get it, think, Yuuki said.

Yuuki? I didn’t know why Yuuki started speaking to me. Morimoto

Yuuki was a girl in *Episode Six*. I might've been a bit perturbed. I wasn't used to thinking, so actually doing that gave me a slight headache. No, a sizable one. It hurt quite a bit. As if my head was about to split open and a singing flower would spring out of it. A singing and dancing flower that eats people. That flower from the movie *The Little Shop of Horrors*. My head hurt. Seshiru the cannibal. Serika the cannibal. The cannibal Tsukumo Juuku. Why do they all eat people? What does it mean to eat someone? I couldn't understand. That meant there was something I didn't know and had no hopes to figure out no matter how much I thought about it, but even so I had to think. I had come here to think. If I didn't get something, I should think; that's what Yuuki had told me. ...Yuuki? Why was it Yuuki? I didn't understand either. It was yet another thing I had yet to understand. There was something I didn't know. There were many such things. But what did I not know, exactly? I didn't even know what I didn't know.

Seshiru went on:

"They made sure nobody had noticed the Aoyama doll while guiding the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku around the house, asked Tsukumojuuku to come to the chapel today at around eleven in the morning, came here before the appointment, and installed themselves on the cross.

"They then waited for Tsukumojuuku up there. When he showed up alone, they shot him with a bowgun, re-installed the Christ statue on the cross, placed and lit the seven candles around Tsukumojuuku's body, and finally returned to their room."

"Wait, hold on," Kawabe said. "So Aoyama-kun is the culprit?"

Seshiru shook his head. "With a doll this similar to the statue of Christ, it would only take one person to suspect a switch for all suspicions to turn to Aoyama-san. However, if Aoyama-san is suspicious for his resemblance to Christ, how about the other person that looks just like him? Given Aoyama-san's role in this movie, there should be an actor playing his character's fraternal twin, isn't there?"

Everyone got chills running down their spines.

"Satou Kazuhiro-san. You play that role, don't you?"

“Ehh? Satou-san?” Iwai said.

“Hold on, hold on. I was on the net while this was happening,” Satou objected. “I mean, yeah internet logs can be falsified any way one wants...but I swear, I was.”

“Exactly. Internet logs can be forged in many ways. And since you know that full-well, there is no way you would use these to claim an alibi for yourself. And yet, that’s your alibi, which means you don’t have anything to hide. You haven’t killed Tsukumojuuku. I hope that you all understand that nobody is free of suspicions now.”

Everyone nodded.

Did you never consider that Satou might have used that flimsy alibi on purpose because he knew the detective would think that way, Seshiru?

“That being said,” Seshiru said, “how about the person playing Satou-san’s stunt?”

The feeling of surprise coursing through everybody made ripples across the chapel.

“How does that sound, Furutaka-san?” Seshiru said.

Everyone looked at Furutaka. He had a big smile on his face.

“There were two statues resembling Furutaka-san. The Christ statue and the Aoyama doll. Both of them were essential for his plans. The former so he could place it in his bed this morning. That way, if anyone were to open his door and take a peek inside, they would see Furutaka-san sleeping on his bed at first glance. With the lack of windows inside the Cross House’s rooms, it gets really dark without turning the lights on. The room being dark indicated he was asleep, so nobody would turn on the lights and wake him up unless they had some urgent business with him. So with the room in the dark, minus the light coming in through the door, the statue in his bed would amply do the trick.”

Seshiru then showed everyone two polaroids.

“These are pictures I took of the Christ statue we found under Furutaka-san’s bed. The first photo is a close-up of under the bed while the second one is from further away so as to capture the entire room. I hope you can tell that this room and bed belong to Furutaka-

san. And the statue of Christ was indeed found under his bed."

As everyone was busy being submerged by surprise, Seshiru produced two more polaroids.

"This is Aoyama-san's doll we found under his own bed. The composition is the same, a close-up and a more general shot."

"Hold on, what," Aoyama said. "I never knew about this!"

"That is most natural," Seshiru said. "After all, Furutaka-san slipped it under your bed while you were asleep. In reality, it didn't matter to him whether to hide the doll under your bed or Satou-san's. Either way, once Tsukumojuuku died and the doll was found, the person occupying the room where it was found would be suspected. And the diversion would normally create time for him to falsify evidence. However, everything didn't work in Furutaka-san's favor: On the morning on which he killed Tsukumojuuku, Abe-san made many trips to Iwai-san's bedroom, right next to his. Having taken notice of this behavior and unable to predict when Abe-san would come out of his room next, he missed the chance to take the Christ statue out of his room and put it back up on the cross. And with Tsukumojuuku's corpse being discovered in the meantime, that chance was now forever lost. And it instead gave me a chance to find the statue..."

Everyone's eyes traveled back and forth between Seshiru and Furutaka; Furutaka still adorned a fearless grin on his face.

"I have a question for you, Furutaka-san. When you used," Seshiru said, producing a bowgun, "this to shoot an arrow—whose heart did it pierce? It wasn't Tsukumojuuku's. After all, Tsukumojuuku is alive and seated amongst you," he pointed at me. "Furutaka-san, who was it? Who did you shoot and why?"

Furutaka answered:

"Fuck if I know, moron. I mean, I never killed anyone."

Seshiru asked, "Then why was the Christ's statue found inside your bedroom?"

Furutaka said, "Hah, so stupid. You really just suspected me because of that statue? Fine, I'll tell you, I'll tell you what I did with that statue. Go ahead and look under the cloth covering Christ's ass."

“Huh?”

“His ass, I said. A-s-s. His butt.”

Seshiru picked up the statue resting under the cross and flipped the cloth on his butt. There was a hole in his butt.

“You see a hole, don’t you?” Furutaka said.

There was a hole. A cylindrical hole of about five centimeters in diameter.

“You see, I put a masturbation apparatus in there and stuck my dick inside.”

Everyone was taken aback. Seshiru flinched too.

Furutaka was laughing.

“Yeah, you heard it right. I fucked Christ. I banged his ass from behind, hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

“Ehhh?!” everyone screamed while the people seated around him stood up and took some distance. Seshiru was just as surprised by this unexpected antichrist.

You’re so stupid, Seshiru. You’ve always been dumb, but I guess you still are.

“Seshiru.”

He looked at me, dumbfounded. All that being said, *I* was the real antichrist. I was the dragon fighting the angels. The ‘Great Detective Tsukumo Juuku’ had called me ‘Dragon’ in *Episode Four*, and he was correct. I would grant God’s wish by saying what I was meant to—all in order to kill God.

I directed my eyes at the sky inside the chapel.

“**How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?**” I stood up, walked up close to Seshiru, and said, “Seshiru, **you should rest yet for a little, until your fellow servants and your brethren are all killed as they are meant to be.**”

The ‘fifth seal’ had now been opened.

A fake Christ had been crucified onto a cross in *Episode Four* as well. Seiryouin Ryuusui. Could that have foretold what would happen to Seshiru’s deduction? Yes. That must be the case.

All things have meaning.

3

“So I’m telling you, someone must’ve killed that Tsukumo guy outside and dropped him in from the skylight,” Hoshino said on his way back from driving Furutaka out of the chapel, then noticed me. “That being said, that guy wasn’t actually Tsukumo, huh. Hey you, who are you to the Tsukumojuuku-san who got killed?” he asked me. “No matter how we look at it, to us, you’re the same guy who was killed.”

Exactly. That was probably me. I didn’t know how a second me came to be. But I must have somehow passed through another ‘wormhole’ and landed here, like when the ‘me’ in *Episode Five* entered the ‘bottomless abyss’ the meteor had created and timeslipped to the past—probably to *Episode Four*. Though, of course, there was no way the character representing ‘me’ in ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’s’ novels would come out of those into the real world. There must be a good reason for this second me to be here.

Had someone created a clone of me right after my birth? That way, someone identical to me could have grown up to my age. But clones aren’t realistic—Serika interrupted my train of thoughts.

“So that’s how it was, Tsukumo. You did all of that to lure us here, eh.”

Serika started presenting her deduction:

“Indeed, human bodies are soft yet firm. You used that fact, Tsukumo. Slicing someone’s belly open and making their organs spill out would kill them, but slicing it without damaging any organs or blood vessels and not letting any bacteria in wouldn’t really be lethal.”

Exactly. Kurihara Yurika and Ueda Naoko had their bellies sliced and their organs taken out and died.

“One doesn’t die if their organs stay intact. Yes, it would hurt, but it would merely hurt. With their organs untouched, people don’t die. Exactly. Isn’t that right, Seshiru?”

Serika carelessly called Seshiru by his real name. If there was a

police officer here, they would recognize them to be Katou Seshiru and Serika and arrest them on the spot.

“Seshiru, go ahead and show your iron will to Tsukumo.”

Iron will?

“Tsukumo, observe and learn how much suffering Seshiru went through because of your curse. Seshiru, show him.”

Seshiru pulled up his T-shirt.

Ohh, the ‘Seshiru under the toilet’ from *Episode Four*! That ‘Seshiru’ kept living with ‘my’ katana stabbed in the X mark on his left torso, but the ‘Inugami Yasha’ Seshiru currently before my eyes had a steel rod stabbed in that X mark. It was hollow and round—a shiny-clean steel pipe. Or maybe it would be more proper to call it a piercing. Or was it a short straw to sip on the world?

I crouched down and took a look through the pipe tunnel in his chest. By my sunglasses, I could see past his back.

“Seshiru ended up like this because of you, Tsukumo. *You* pushed him that far.”

I looked up at his face, still crouched. He averted his eyes from me.

I leaned closer to Seshiru’s chest and gently bit on his nipple with my lips. Seshiru’s good old nipples. The hand holding the hems of his T-shirt up jolted. I then turned my face sideways and blew on him, causing the pipe in chest to vibrate. A whistle? No, this sonority belonged to a trumpet. Seshiru was the trumpet. Trumpet. Although the seven angels’ seven trumpets had brought calamities in *Episode Five* and *Episode Six*, this trumpet being sounded only made Seshiru embarrassed, it didn’t cause anyone sadness or grief.

I raised my face. I wasn’t an ‘angel.’

“Stop it, Tsukumo,” Serika said. “Can’t you understand Seshiru’s suffering?”

“Well, I’m the Devil, you see,” I said. “The Devil is also called Satan. He’s God’s enemy. I’m the dragon fighting the angels.”

Serika sent me a dubious look and tilted her head. She then said, “Tsukumo, show me your chest too. You should also have a bruise on it. You opened a hole in your chest yourself, slowly inserted the arrow

from which you'd removed the arrowhead inside, pushed your heart aside with the tip, made it come out on the other side, and put the arrowhead back on, all to make it seem like someone had shot you—there should still be a bruise from it on your chest."

I took that rusty katana out of my bag on the floor.

The Angel Bunnies were taken aback. "Hey, hey, hey, don't be crazy," someone said.

I unsheathed it. *Schhhwing.* It made the same sound it had once produced. Serika took a step back without removing her glaring eyes from me for an instant. I shook my head.

"Serika, please get on all fours here."

"...What will you do?"

"I won't cut your head off or anything." Unlike 'Ookubo Kengo' who had cut many heads off in *Episode Three*. Unlike 'me' who had cut 'Seshiru's' head off in the finale of *Episode Three*.

"Tsukumo, show me your left torso. Now."

I pulled up my shirt and showed my smooth chest. Serika took a step back.

"Serika, stop running away. Come here and get on all fours."

"No. Don't kill me."

"I won't."

"No."

"I won't kill you."

I put on a gentle smile. I could tell Serika's body was losing its strength. Even without my eyeballs I was still beautiful.

Beautiful? Without my eyeballs?

How did that even work?

Serika walked up to me and got on all fours at my feet.

I addressed Seshiru, who was still maintaining the hems of his T-shirt up, "Get on top of Serika, Seshiru."

He let go of his T-shirt and mounted Serika. I swiftly went around him, katana in hand, yelled, "Come and see!" and thrust the sword into Seshiru. The tip of my katana pierced his T-shirt, passed through the steel-pipe tunnel inside his chest, and came out on the other side, yet again ripping his T-shirt open. My katana was piercing his chest,

and yet Seshiru wasn't dead. However, he had experienced 'death,' mitate-wise.

I said, "**And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold, a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.** Seshiru, you are rather figuratively 'Death' sitting on your pale horse. This sword piercing your chest is the 'sword' bestowed to you as 'power' and the 'Hell' following you."

Hearing my words, Seshiru made an expression of salvation. I had stabbed 'my' 'sword' in 'Seshiru' in *Episode Three* as well. If my memory serves right, that was 'Ookubo Kengo's' 'saber from the People's Army.' 'I' had also stabbed 'Seshiru' to death with a 'military knife' in *Episode Five*. If we counted the Seshiru under the toilet in *Episode Four*, this was the fourth time I was killing him. This should hopefully be enough. I needed to give up on Seshiru now. The brother I had yearned for so strongly but could never obtain. I had killed Seshiru on four separate occasions out of frustration. Since Seshiru had stabbed this steel pipe in his chest because of the X mark, you could say I had killed him five times by now.

The Angel Bunnies were looking at Seshiru, Serika, and me from a distance, flabbergasted.

They were looking at me. I was looking at them. How did this work?

I didn't have my eyeballs in theory.

How could I see them?

How could I, Rie?

Rie?

'Ishida Rie' was the mother of my triplets in *Episode Five*. But why had I seeked help from her just now? Why did Rie exist within me?

She was merely a character ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ had created.

I supported my head with my hands.

“Tsukumo?”

Serika called out my name from behind.

Who did I love and who was I going out with?

Who had given birth to Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest—my triplets?

I was extremely perturbed. The cause must have been West Akatsuki. I shouldn’t have returned somewhere I had once left. Tsutomu had died. Tsutomu had died. Tsutomu had died.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!”

4

I collapsed onto the floor and Seshiru and Serika came over to help me. That dumbass Seshiru still had the katana in his chest and scraped part of my cheeks off. I shed blood. Suzuki-kun had shaved my nose and ears off. She had gouged my eyes. And yet I was beautiful. Too beautiful. People fainted when I removed my sunglasses.

But why was any of this happening?

“Ahyuck,” nonchalantly said Furutaka, who had been driven out after being judged a deviant by the others and was now coming back. I looked at him—he was carrying a bundle of arrows in his hands.

“Evidence, get!”

Furutaka dropped the arrows on the chapel’s floor. It only took me a glance to count the arrows scattering on the floor.

48 arrows.

“You see, I kinda wanted something to grab your attention so I went into the mountain and, look, there were tons of these, and still are. Isn’t this mega important evidence? Doesn’t seem like the police found any yet.”

“Furutaka…” Hoshino said. “Dude, if that’s actually evidence you gotta leave it where you found it, moron!”

“Eh, nah, it’s fine. I mean, there’s still so many of them outside...”

I said, “Furutaka-san, could you bring me there?”

My eyes devoid of eyeballs looked at the sky that was now quite dark. The others didn’t seem to have noticed yet because of my sunglasses, but this was theoretically impossible.

It was still two in the afternoon. But the sky was too gloomy. A lump of clouds had formed above us. The sky was clear in the distance.

“There, there, look, you should be able to spot some,” Furutaka pointed somewhere with his finger, and indeed there were arrows there. They were stuck in the cedar trees. Looking closely, the forest west of the Cross House was full of arrows. Most of them were inside cedar trees, but a few were piercing the ground. Vertically.

I pulled out an arrow out of the ground and looked up. The viscous and sticky clouds were forming a whirlpool.

A whirlpool.

Arrows.

I recalled the steel ball that had crushed Tsutomu. I asked Nakai Sayaka, who happened to be next to me, “That steel ball wasn’t a prop for your movie, was it?” She answered, “Of course not. How would we use that in a movie, come on. But yeah, what was it doing there anyway?”

I didn’t get that. And thus I had stopped thinking. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t know things I didn’t understand, so thinking about them could never lead me to understanding them. I had stopped thinking once again.

Think, Umi had told me.

I had come here to think.

Think.

Think on your own.

I said, “A steel ball being here doesn’t make sense. Arrows being here doesn’t make sense. There’s no way someone had shot that many arrows in there.”

Right. Both the ball and the arrows were unrealistic.

And yet they existed.

Why was that the case?

Someone had brought them here.

Who would do that?

Nobody would.

No human would.

Something that wasn't human had brought these here.

I turned to the sky.

The arrows were pointed straight down.

I ran back towards the Cross House. I jumped over fallen branches, stepped on weeds, and ran under a fallen tree. Out of the forest, I headed for the area next to the chapel. It had a crushed Daibakushou Curry—my dear Tsutomu—and the steel ball responsible for that still sitting on him.

I looked at the ground beneath Tsutomu himself beneath the ball. Despite Tsutomu acting as a cushion, the ball had dented the ground about ten centimeters deep. The soil here wasn't mud. It was dry, quite-packed, and solid dirt. And yet the ball had made a dent in it. It had fallen from quite high.

I looked at the sky. Would dropping this from the chapel's roof, about two meters to the side, make such a dent in the ground? No, to begin with, who would bring a steel ball all the way on top of the chapel's roof and drop it to kill a detective? That ball clearly weighed over 200 kg. Let's assume multiple people worked on it assisted by machines—still, would they be able to kill Tsutomu? Would anyone think of something like that?

Of course not. This ball wasn't brought here by humans either. Tsutomu hadn't been killed by anyone either.

I looked at the thick clouds in the sky. The whirlpool.

The whirlpool.

Oh, the whirlpool. I'd figured it out.

The heavens had killed Tsutomu.

And me as well.

The Angel Bunnies came after me, who had suddenly run out of the forest and came back to the Cross House. “Heeey, what’s wrong?” Kajiwara Ayako asked.

“Everyone, listen! Please go back to the forest! There might be other steel balls similar to this one in there!”

“Ehhh?!”

The Angel Bunnies split up to search the forest and found two more steel balls. Both of them were half-buried in the cedar forest’s ground and couldn’t be told apart from standard rocks at a first glance.

I climbed one of them and turned to the sky. The thick and dark clouds were wriggling around, forming a whirlpool.

We should return to the Cross House before God kills me or an Angel Bunny.

“What do you want to do with these,” Obata Ayako, who’d stuck with me, asked.

“We can leave them here.”

“Oh, phew, I don’t know what I would’ve done if you’d told us to bring them back. Oh, hey guys, over here!”

The Angel Bunnies quickly gathered around me. The whirlpool in the sky was also right above us. I felt like someone was peering down at us from within the whirlpool. Like someone was staring intently at us from it.

“These balls, the ball next to the chapel, all of these arrows, as well as the arrow that killed Tsukumojuuku all fell from there,” I said, pointing at the sky—at the whirlpool.

“The heck are you saying?” Obata said.

“A miscellaneous rain. You’ve probably heard of lluvia de peces before, haven’t you? The phenomenon where fish suddenly start falling from the sky.”

“Oh, I’ve heard about it,” Iwai Yumi said.

I said, “There have been multiple reports of that happening this very century in Greece, England, and America. And fish aren’t the

only thing raining down. It can be frogs, birds, and even cars at times. And today, it was arrows and steel balls that rained here."

The Angel Bunnies around me were at a loss for words.

I continued, "One of the arrows fell down through the open skylight and pierced the left torso of Tsukumojuuku, who happened to be below it. And one of the steel balls crashed into...Daibakushou Curry."

My dear Tsutomu. But I believed Tsutomu's death to be what brought me to this solution. There were many more possibilities I couldn't have possibly chosen from with only the arrows. But, thanks to the steel ball, I had reached this solution.

"But like, how do these fish and frogs rain?" Obata asked.

"One theory promotes that tornadoes are to blame. For instance, a tornado would form in the ocean, suck fish out of the water, and later make them fall somewhere else."

The Angel Bunnies all looked up at the sky as I was explaining.

The whirlpool in the sky.

"Woah, shit. That means more stuff might fall?" Hongou Takeshi asked. Hearing that, Abe Atsushi was the first to start running. The rest followed him a tempo later. I ran too.

But I was actually mistaken. My deduction right now wasn't correct. I knew that from the beginning.

I followed the Angel Bunnies out of the cedar forest, into the Cross House, then in front of the chapel. I looked at the spot where 'Tsukumojuuku's' corpse had been found. There was a skylight above him. It could be opened, but was closed right now. It had been closed when 'Tsukumojuuku' had been found. That window would need to be shattered for 'Tsukumojuuku' to have been killed by an arrow raining down from the sky. Either that, or it needed to be open. Otherwise there should be traces of 'Tsukumojuuku' climbing the wall to close the window. But the window was close shut, the glass pane undamaged, and the wall clean. There wasn't even blood on it. To begin with, someone shot in the heart might possibly walk on flat ground, but certainly not climb a wall to close a skylight three meters above ground.

I was mistaken.

That was alright. I needed to be mistaken.

I silently entered the chapel. Seshiru and Serika were seated next to each other on a pew. Serika's head was resting on Seshiru's shoulder. Both of them had their eyes closed.

"Seshiru," he opened his eyes to my voice. "Seshiru, could you give me the katana for a bit?" I then said to Serika, "Sorry Serika. Could you get on all fours once more?"

Great detectives must never err. A mistaken detective is not a great detective. The Great Detective Tsukumojuuku had to die.

Could the 'Great Detective Tsukumojuuku' whose heart had been pierced by an arrow have also erred and committed suicide?

That couldn't be.

I received the katana from Seshiru and peeled my face with it. Just like 'I' had done while talking with 'Serika' in the car in *Episode Five*. I inserted the blade in-between my skull and flesh, then stripped it all away. My sunglasses fell to the ground. So did my face.

I was no longer beautiful. Which meant I was no longer 'Tsukumojuuku.' 'Tsukumojuuku' was a name given to overly-beautiful people.

Then who was I?

Nobody. I was simply me.

I then got onto Serika, who was waiting on all fours, and said,

"**And when he had ohened the third seal, I heard the third east say, Con and see. And I heheld, and lo, a flack horse; and he that sat on hin had a hair of alances in his hand.**"

Just like in *Episode Five*, my pronunciation was altered by my lack of lips, but this was good enough. Here, the sword in my hands served as the 'pair of balances' to weigh my life.

I would keep on fulfilling all of the remaining mitate.

...Using my corpse.

5

The moment I lost my face, my mind cleared up. The moment I lost my name, the scenery before me cleared up. I ran out of the

chapel and kicked the wall in front of it. That was where ‘Tsukumojuuku’ had been found, right below the skylight that had denied my deduction earlier.

The Angel Bunnies scattered to the sides in screams upon seeing me without my face. I had kicked the wall in the middle of that split, and that was the jackpot. My leg didn’t bounce back, it collapsed the wall.

It led to a narrow, hidden space.

I didn’t know who that was, but the owner of this house was probably some kind of deviant. This passage was the third layer of cross in the Cross House. It continued through the space in-between the 24 rooms. I entered that dark passage. Once in the 30-centimeter-wide hidden passage extending straight from the chapel, the Angel Bunnies started commenting on it: “Oh, wait, there’s a hole to peep on my room!” “Woah, the heck is this pervert house. I wish I’d found this on my own...” “Oh my god, this is my room. Hey, I hope none of you knew about this passage, okay?” The passage forked in the middle towards the east and west entrances, but we all continued straight to the end where I found a knob, twisted it, and opened a secret door onto the south entrance.

“This is the arrow’s trajectory,” I said, looking at the Angel Bunnies who were coming out of the passage. I wasn’t wearing my sunglasses, but nobody fainted.

To begin with, it didn’t make sense for people to faint.

I said: “The culprit shot ‘Tsukumojuuku,’ who was standing in front of the hidden door before the chapel, from inside this passage and killed him.”

Higashimoto Mika then said, “Eh～, but like, I was walking right behind you the whole time, and there was dust all over the floor in front of you but not even one footprint.”

I said, “Then they must have made ‘Tsukumojuuku’ open the secret door and shot him from here, from the south entrance.”

“Still, you’d need to go to the chapel to close the other door anyway. But with Tanaka and Abe loitering in the hallway, that’s not

really an option. And if you can't use this secret passage either, there's still Yoshida and Mizorogi outside," Satou Kazuhiro said.

That was right.

I could now exhaust one more mitate.

I ran back through the passage, borrowed the sword from Seshiru in the chapel, pressed the blade against the back of my neck, then pushed against the hilt with one hand and the back of the blade with the other to cut my head off.

"Ugh!" everyone screamed.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, don't go overboard," someone said. I looked at him. That was Tanaka Masatsugu.

I could see. I could still see even with my head cut off.

What in the world was I?

How did this work?

Even without my head, I could remember Satou Emiko's face. Even without my brain, I could think about lots of things.

Or could it be that I was merely remembering things? In *Episode Four* I was reading people's memories from body parts. Was the same thing happening to me? Was my soul enjoying the memories that remained engraved not in my head, but in my body?

But Satou Emiko was a girl from *Episode Three*. Why did I have memories of a fictional girl inside me?

Also, how did I manage to say this:

"**And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red; and was given unto him that sat thereon a great sword.**"

My head was clearly rolling on the chapel's floor. What had I become?

6

Now headless, I headed outside the Cross House, leaving the frightened Angel Bunnies behind, and then found a switch behind the chapel. I flipped it. Nothing happened. But when someone flips a switch, in reality, *something* should inevitably happen.

What could it be? What had happened?

It seemed as though nothing had happened—that's because nothing had happened *yet*. I waited. There's no way I couldn't observe the results from nearby the switch. But nothing happened still. I flipped it a few more times. Still no changes to be seen.

What did this mean?

I thought.

I thought about what I didn't understand.

In *Episode Four*, the 'other me' had pressed a button and made the cross on which 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' was crucified mechanically go down along with that entire wall. But when I did the same thing right now, nothing happened. What was I missing?

What was the hint?

I thought back on the contents of *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Four*, *Five*, and *Episode Six* with my lost head. But I didn't find anything that could work as a hint.

The sky above me formed a huge, swirling whirlpool. I could see a pitch-black, funnel-shaped object slowly raining down from the sky.

Finally. Something was finally coming.

Would this big and narrow tongue extending from the sky lick us? It might be more arrows raining down. It might be a steel ball raining down.

The finale of *Episode Five* flashed in my mind. 'Rie,' 'Tolerant,' 'Sincere,' 'Honest,' 'my mother-in-law,' and 'I' had jumped inside the 'rift in spacetime' brought about by the 'meteor.' That 'meteor' had created the 'rift in spacetime' and the 'wormhole.' 'We' had entered that 'wormhole.' What did we see then?

A bright-white sky. Us being sucked up into the sky. An inverted heaven and earth.

'We' had been sucked into the 'rift in spacetime.' Put another way, the 'rift in spacetime' was sucking things up.

I looked at the sky.

Arrows and steel balls had fallen. Where had they come from? I could understand fish and frogs. They were in any ocean, river, and city. Tornadoes could transport them. I could accept that.

But where would you find this many arrows and steel balls?

Only on a battlefield from the Middle Ages.

But there weren't any such battlefields here. We were in modern-day West Akatsuki, Fukui.

The wormhole we'd been sucked into was a tunnel, but when this funnel-shaped tornado extending its tongue down from above me touches the ground, it too will be one big tunnel. Tornadoes aren't exactly spinning at one third the speed of light, but they are pretty fast nonetheless.

Could wormholes exist inside tornadoes?

There was no need to question that. The giant steel ball that had crushed my little brother was still right next to me. There were also the arrows we'd picked up from the forest. These had come from a faraway world, a world from the past. Through the hurricane.

Hold on, I thought.

Wouldn't this also solve the existence of the murdered 'Tsukumojuuku'?

Right.

The heavens hadn't only sucked and poured down arrows and steel balls. It had also sucked up the me from another time and sent it down here.

That's why there were two of me existing simultaneously in the same world.

I didn't live on a Middle-Ages battlefield. But I had died from an arrow. So maybe, when I got sucked up by the tornado and thrown into the mix of arrows and steel balls it had collected on another occasion, an arrow spinning around at high speed in that turmoil pierced through my chest during the wormhole transfer on a fit of bad luck? And then I landed in the Cross House...

No, hold on, this doesn't work. The 'Great Detective Tsukumojuuku' had been summoned here by the Angel Bunnies. He hadn't come down from the sky in the same way as the arrows and balls.

So what exactly had happened?

I'd figured out that an arrow stabbed the 'Great Detective Tsukumojuuku' inside the tornado's wormhole. But there was one

more. There was another ‘Great Detective Tsukumojuuku,’ the one the Angel Bunnies had invited. They’d said I looked just like him. If he was that similar to my overly-beautiful self, then that ‘Great Detective Tsukumojuuku’ was probably me as well.

In other words, the tornado had sucked up two ‘Tsukumojuuku’s. Which means I would get sucked up by a tornado twice in the future, and die by an arrow in one of them. And in the one I wouldn’t die in, I would land here before today, call myself the ‘Great Detective Tsukumojuuku,’ be invited here, catch the dead ‘Tsukumojuuku’ as he falls from the tornado, switch with him, and vanish out of sight. As for why this ‘Tsukumojuuku’ could plan this out, that’s because he was from the future and knew about the Cross House Case that had taken place today. Everything connects with this.

It made sense. Still, who could have thought! Who could have known that time travel was real!

But the me in *Episode Five* had already entered a ‘wormhole’ once. Let’s say the tornado sucked me up right now...I started thinking, but held off. What was going through my head? *Episode Five* was merely a fictitious tale written by ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui.’ Not something I had experienced first-hand. Since when was I thinking of things other people wrote as my own experiences? Why were such mishaps happening in my mind? Isn’t one’s memory supposed to be better than that at differentiating reality and fiction?

And yet, the names of the girls popping in my head for the past while had all been different.

The current me felt like my triplets’ mothers were Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko.

What the hell had I done?

Who was Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest’s mother?

I shook my head. Whatever, my tornado wormhole idea was correct. Everything matched up perfectly.

Hold on, what? I’d just shook my head.

...My head?

How had I shook a head I didn’t have?

I put a hand to my head. It *was* there. My long hair. My face. It

was all there. The head I thought I'd lost earlier was a hallucination. I must have been so scared of cutting my head off I created a hallucination to escape from it. Still, I was glad I had my head. It had helped me think. It had helped me get the idea of the tornado wormhole. This was the right choice. But I still had the mitate of the first seal to pull off.

That had been reserved for the fake answer this switch was meant to drive me to. I had to err once more. I had to err and complete the *Revelation to John* mitate. I couldn't return to Chofu while I still had mitate left. I couldn't go back to my triplets in Chofu.

Ahh! But I didn't even know the name of my triplets' mother!

What in the world had happened?! Who had hugged me on the Tamagawa riverbanks?! Who had told me she loved me on that bench?!

Right then, someone said, "Hey," so I turned around.

I was standing there.

The third Tsukumojuuku.

"God is waiting for you on His Divine Throne," that Tsukumojuuku said. "That's the stairs John climbed."

I could see it too in the sky Tsukumojuuku was looking at. The tornado's mouth that would soon reach us.

"Get all this riff-raff done with," Tsukumojuuku said. "Tsutomu will surely have come back to life at our next stop."

Tsutomu.

Tsutomu.

Tsutomu. My cute little brother.

"Heeeeey! The heck's going on in the sky?!" someone said. I looked at the source—Iwai Yumi and Nakai Sayaka were approaching us.

"It's dangerous here, go back inside the house," I told them.

Hearing that, they moved their eyes from the sky to me and said, "Oooh! There you are! Tsukumo-san, your little brother is still alive!"

“Eh?”

I looked at the corpse crushed by the steel ball next to me.

“Ah, yeah, apparently that’s a disciple,” Nakai said. “He claimed to be Daibakushou Curry, but he was actually Daibakushou Happy II. The poor guy.”

An unrecognizable corpse. A switch. Oh my god!

“Tsutomu!”

I looked up. I grabbed the other Tsukumojuuku’s hand.

“Let’s go!”

However, he didn’t budge. “We can’t,” he said. “We need to end everything here. Otherwise it will not take us to the City of God.”

My heart was jumping in joy at the news of Tsutomu being alive, I couldn’t pay attention to what the other me was saying.

“Who cares about that mitate. We can think of something when we meet up with Tsutomu. Right now entering the tornado is the correct option. That tornado acts as a wormhole and...” I was saying, when the other me pulled out the katana he was hiding behind his back.

“You are mistaken.”

He said before cutting my head off. Once again.

My head rolled on the floor. Iwai and Nakai screamed.

But I could see my own head rolling on the floor.

“**And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, I heard one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.**”

I could also hear the other me saying that.

Just how did this work?

I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I didn’t know. Think.

Think. Think. Think.

A man appeared before my headless self. Although he wasn't on a white horse, he was holding a bow.

"Onii-chan!"

It was Tsutomu. He really was alive.

7

"I don't know, he suddenly took the sword and cut his head off again..." Nakai and Iwai were explaining to the Angel Bunnies. Despite being scared of both the weather and me, they had apparently listened to Tsutomu telling them to come out of the chapel.

"The weather isn't looking good, let's go home, onii-chan. Let's just get off this mountain for the time being, okay?"

"Not yet," I said. "I still have one more *Revelation to John* mitate left. And I haven't even touched on *Genesis* yet..."

"What are you saying?" Tsutomu said. "Please, let's just leave, the tornado looks like it's coming down for us."

"That's the stairs leading to the Divine Throne," I said, making Tsutomu giggle.

"Come on, it's hard to send the ball back. Also it's in bad taste. My assistant died, did you forget?"

Assistant. Assistant. I recalled *Episode Two*. When 'Tsutomu' showed up on that infotainment program. The tall man who'd walked ahead of 'Tsutomu' and entered the 'Ueda house' first. The 'media' and everyone else thought he was a great detective and called him as such, but the man who then talked to them as the 'Great Detective Daibakushou Curry' was that buzz-cut 'Tsutomu.' I looked at the man crushed under the steel ball. I couldn't quite tell because the ball was hiding it, but thinking about it, he might kind of look like that tall man.

"What was this boy's name?" I asked. "Boy? He was older than both of us, you know? Daibakushou Happy II," Tsutomu replied. "No," I said. "His real name." Tsutomu then went, "Ahh," and said, "Sugano Takuya."

The officer from *Episode One*.

“Now, let’s leave,” Tsutomu said, so I repeated, “We can’t. I still have to solve this case.”

“Case? There’s no case to solve, onii-chan,” Tsutomu said.

“What are you saying?” the other me said. “Isn’t there one right here? The me killing. The murder of ‘Tsukumojuuku.’ We still have no idea who killed me!”

“We can’t, Tsutomu,” I said. “I’m not going back without solving this case.”

“And I’m telling you, onii-chan, there’s no case. Hear me out, please. I made it all up. Onii-chan. *I* called myself ‘Tsukumojuuku’ and pretended to die. I also asked the Angel Bunnies to improvise a performance.”

“What are you…” I said.

“Come on, the tornado will get to us before we can do anything if you keep stalling us with idiocies,” the other me said.

“There’s no case. There is only one inside your head,” Tsutomu insisted. “Onii-chan, I told you to leave everything to me. I came here to save you. Don’t you remember? I said I would come to save you when I become an adult. That’s now.”

“The problem is that this switch exists, though,” the other me said, pointing at the switch on the chapel’s wall. “We’ve yet to reason what it’s there for.”

I nodded. “Fine. Tsutomu, you can leave the rest to us. Take the Angel Bunnies off the mountain please.”

“Let me ask you, then,” Tsutomu said. “Who is this ‘us’?”

“Me and the other me.”

“The other you? Where?”

I pointed at the other me standing next to the chapel’s wall.

“There’s nobody there,” Tsutomu said.

“Exactly, there’s nobody,” the other me said.

“I see,” Tsutomu said. “So this is how you’ve been functioning, onii-chan.”

“What?”

“Come over here for a second. Take a look at what’s behind the stained glass.

I peeked inside through the stained glass.

“There, can you see it?” Tsutomu’s finger pointed at my head on the floor. “You lost one of your heads over there, onii-chan.”

“Yeah.” It was on the floor. So it wasn’t actually a hallucination.

“And here, isn’t this your head as well?”

Tsutomu pointed at my other head on the ground outside.

“It is.”

“Okay, let me tell it to you as it is.”

The other me next to me then said, “Alright, this is the important part, open your ears wide and listen attentively.”

“Onii-chan,” Tsutomu said, “your name is ‘Tsukumojuuku,’ isn’t it? Do you know what that means?”

“I do,” I said. “9 + 9 + 9 = 2 + 7 = 9, it’s the name of the Trinity, isn’t it?”

Tsutomu widened his eyes at my words.

“Hoh~, I see.” He nodded a few times, seemingly impressed. “I guess being three really grants you Manjushri’s wisdom.”

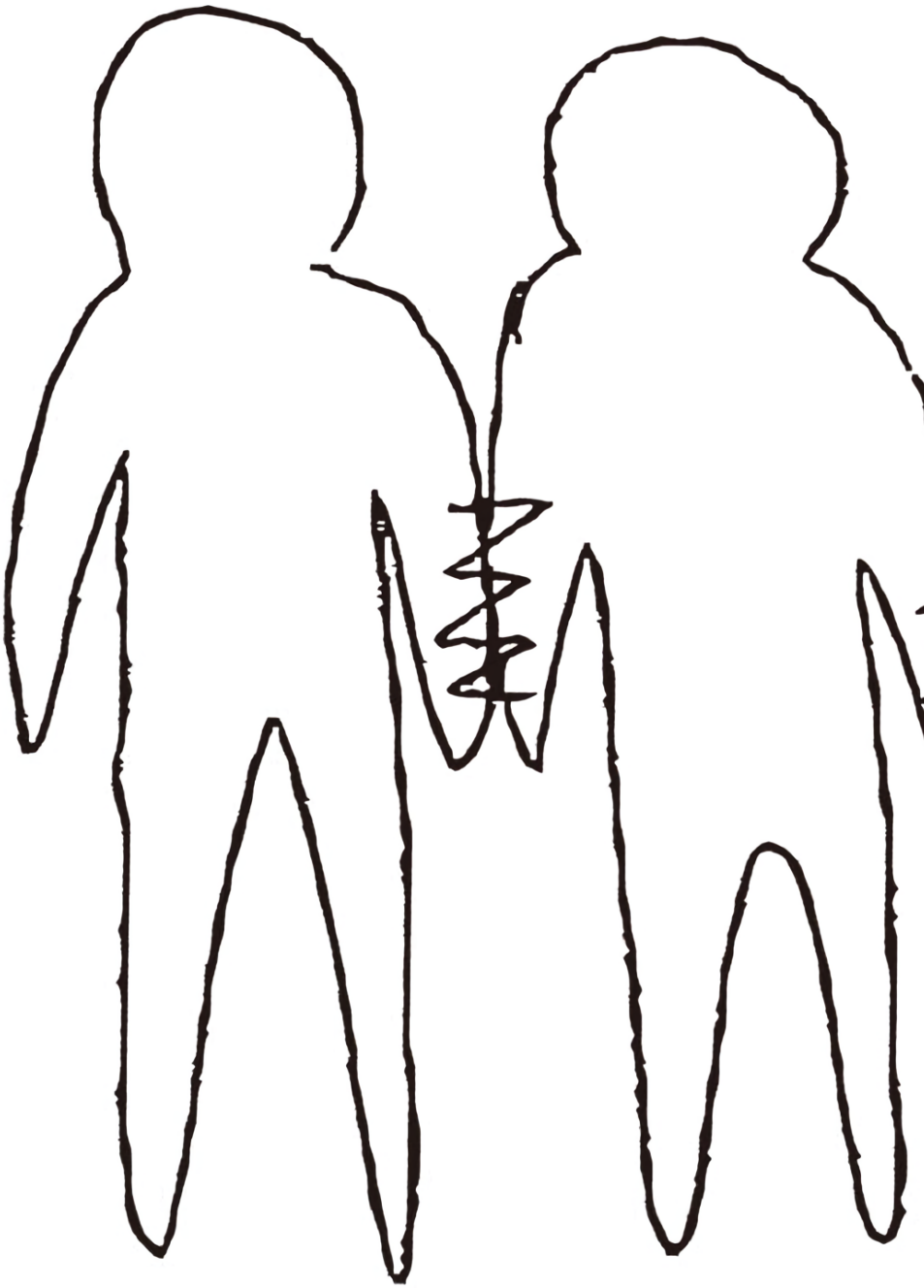
What was he saying?

“But that’s wrong. Still, you were really close. You never fail to amaze me, onii-chan. You were one step away. But I’m not waiting anymore, I’ll just tell you the correct answer, okay? Tell me, do you know the origin of ‘九,’ the kanji for ‘nine’?”

“I don’t.”

My knowledge had bounds.

“I bet you didn’t. You see, for some obscure reason, 九 comes from a hieroglyph representing someone’s bent elbow,” Tsutomu said and wrote something on the floor. ‘ ’ “And as for the origin behind the ten kanji, ‘十,’ it’s a needle with a small hole for a string to go through. You see what I’m talking about? Well, there’s a hieroglyph shaped like that. It looks like this.” ‘’ “Wanna see what ‘Tsukumojuuku’ looks like? It’s three arms sewed together by two needles and strings, isn’t it? So here’s how it would be,”



“How foolish, Tsukumojuuku. In the end your little brother had to come and save you,” he said as the other me vanished into thin air.

I now knew of my true form.

I was a triplet on my own. I was triplets with three heads who shared everything down their shoulders.

I looked to my left. There was my severed neck between me and my left shoulder. I looked to my right. There as well, was my severed neck.

That's how I could take my eyeballs off, have my nose shaved off, my ears cut off, and somehow still make it alive. That's how I could see, hear, and talk despite having lost two of my heads.

Oh, thank god, I thought and cried. I cried all the tears I had. I could cry. I couldn't help but cry.

Because I had finally understood the reason why Suzuki-kun used to call me 'Tolerant,' 'Sincere,' 'Honest,' and 'Tolerant Sincere Honest.'

And me actually being 'Tolerant,' 'Sincere,' and 'Honest' means that my cute triplets were, just like the 'other me,' a hallucination I had produced thanks to 'Manjushri's wisdom.'

And these triplets not existing meant that their mother didn't exist either. Neither Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, Hirose Neko, Satou Emiko, Yashiro Umi, Ishida Rie, Morimoto Yuuki, nor Tsushima Takako. All of the cute girls I used to love.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

I recalled: That guava scent hugging me by the Tamagawa riverside, the scarf tickling me, the hair on my face, the two delicate arms wrapping around my back and necks.

"No! I don't want to lose it all!"

I was scared!

I'm scared, she had said as well. Ahh, but I couldn't remember who she was! I couldn't recall the name of the girl who embraced me and begged me not to go to Fukui! What misery! I wouldn't have come here if I knew this would happen!

My cute triplets who ran straight at me on the banks of the Tamagawa River! Tolerant! Sincere! Honest! I wanted them back too!

Aah, I was such a fool! I had ignored the faint voices calling for me, screaming “Daaaad!” back then! I couldn’t believe myself!

I cried. I kept crying. I considered ending it all by cutting off my last remaining head. But I didn’t. It was futile. My love remained inside my body, so even if my heads were to disappear, my soul would ultimately grieve because of the memory of my love stored inside my body.

Tolerant! Sincere! Honest!

I called my triplets’ names. But, as I was doing so, I understood. I finally understood. I understood against my will. The representation of my triplets ultimately came from my own deformity. Their names came from my own name. Satou Emiko had blamed me for naming them after myself in *Episode Three*, and not only cursed me in the final scene, but also said that anyone who were to kill me would be cursed sevenfold. And she was right.

I had killed myself many times over. So I was cursed sevenfolds, 49 folds, 343 folds, 2401 folds, 16,807 folds, and much more than that, even.

I glared at the sky. This time, with my two eyes.

I would kill God. I would kill God with these very hands!

I would complete the mitate for that sake. And I would rise to the Divine Throne!

I was the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku!

I swung into action and pressed the switch. However, the Cross House still didn’t budge. It didn’t move.

The Cross House didn’t move?

I understood what I was expecting.

I put a hand against the chapel’s wall.

“Drop it, onii-chan. You gotta face who you truly are.”

Shut up, Tsutomu!

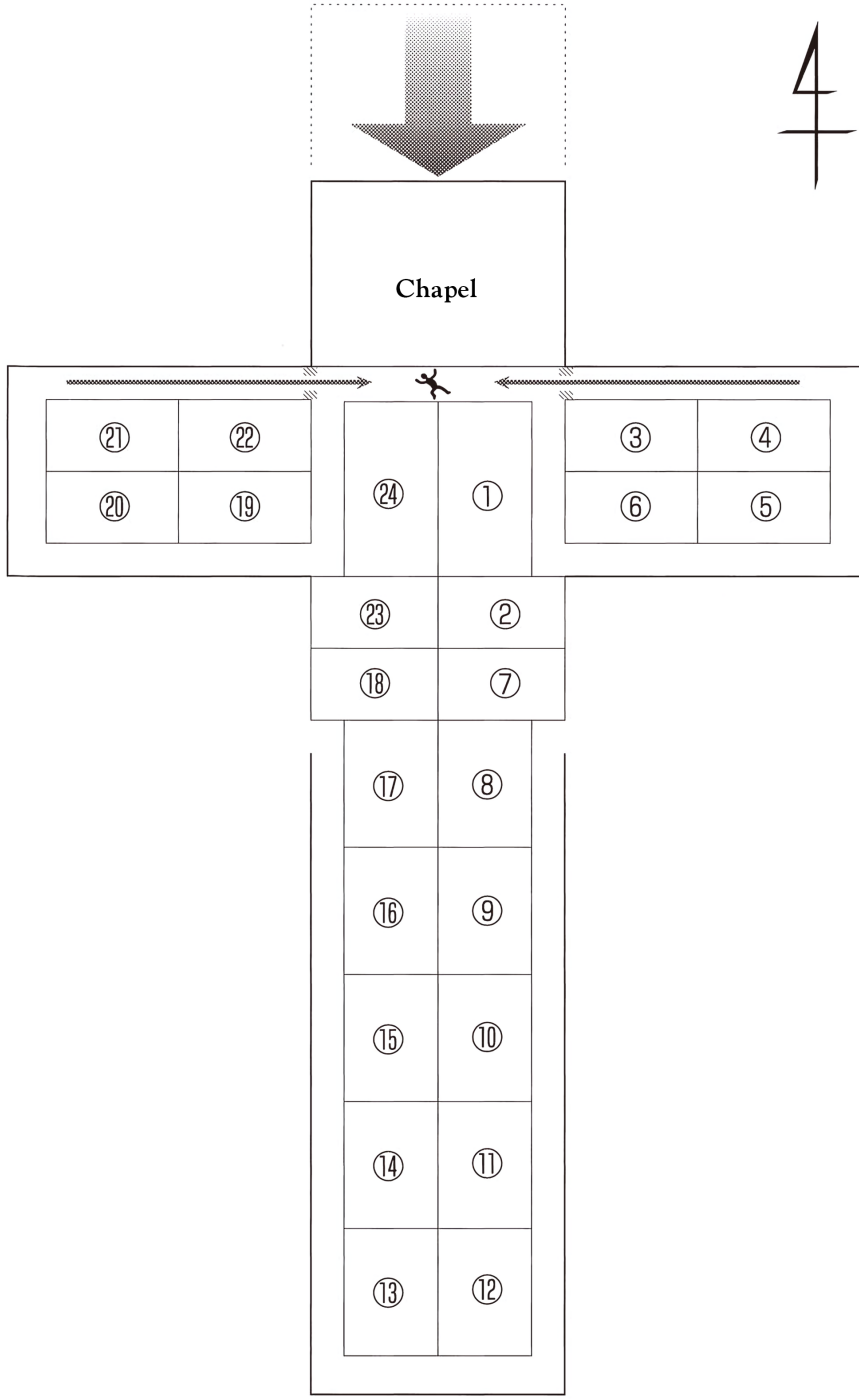
I pressed against the chapel wall. I was the antichrist. I could now decapitate this cross.

“What are you…” Tsutomu started his sentence but stopped in shock. When I pressed against the chapel, the Cross House’s vertical

axis started moving.

"Wow, the power of imagination *is* amazing," Tsutomu said. I pushed the vertical axis 15 meters towards the base. The horizontal axis' hallway aligned with the hallway in front of the chapel.

Cross House



I walked away from the chapel wall and addressed Tsutomu and the Angel Bunnies:

“By displacing the Cross House like so, either Taniguchi Tohru from room or Hanada Sawako from room could have killed Tsukumojuuku with a bowgun!”

Needless to say, I knew this was wrong. But the Angel Bunnies were really kind. “Exactly. Tsukumo-san,” Taniguchi said. “I’m the culprit too!” Hanada said. Yoshida Yukino and Mizorogi Fumie also came up and said, “Same over here, we lied about going outside.” Abe, Hoshino, and Furutaka said, “Now that you mention it, the house was kinda trembling at the time,” and Hongou added, “’Cause your house sucks. The one I slept in was sailing smooth and didn’t move an inch,” to which everyone told him off, “Shut up, we slept in the same damn house.”

I severed my last remaining head, full of gratitude for them.

Tsutomu picked that head up.

“Tsutomu,” I said, now existing merely as a head, “thank you for everything. I’m probably aware of everything you’ve done for me. I’m not really sure I know about all of it, but I know a bunch. I’ll think about the bits I don’t know from now on.”

“Onii-chan,” Tsutomu cried. His way of crying hadn’t changed one bit. He knew how to make my heart choke the best. “Waaaahn,” he cried.

“Don’t cry, Tsutomu. I want to go where the person I love is. Tsutomu. We’ve both become almost-adults now, you and I are free to do whatever we desire. You can forget me now. Also, I’ve never been a good brother anyway. Even just earlier, when I was pushing against the chapel, I asked myself, if I pushed the vertical axis off the cliff and made it slide atop the cedar trees down the forest, would it crash into the Katou house at the base of the mountain? It just flashed in my head for a moment. I just got a feeling that God’s ire ought to befall on the Katou house.”

“Liar!” Tsutomu said.

“I’m not lying. I mean it,” I said. “So no need to worry, you can forget me. Otherwise I might eventually bring calamities upon you.

Even more than I already have."

Tsutomu started bawling again and hugged my head tight. "I don't mind! Onii-chan, onii-chan... Don't leave me, onii-chan. I don't care what you do, please stay by my side."

Tsutomu was yearning for me so strongly a smile popped on my face. "I'm sorry, Tsutomu."

There was nothing to be done. The arms I wished would wrap around me weren't Tsutomu's. I desired these guava-smelling arms.

I said, still as a mere head, "O, the one that sits upon the Divine Throne, the book is a 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' novel. I am the Lamb worthy to take the book and to open the seals thereof. I am worthy of receiving power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessings."

The mouth of the tornado was approaching Tsutomu from above to suck me in as he sobbed. I took my distance from Tsutomu. He said something, but I couldn't hear him because of all the noise the tornado was making. I spun my head around and looked at him. Tsutomu said, "Moron...!" He was right. I was a moron. But I was also right. The reality Tsutomu knew wasn't my reality; my reality was the real one while Tsutomu's reality was a dream. After all, Tsutomu was the 'dreaming Joseph' while I was the 'brothers who banished Joseph.' I felt like *I* was getting banished more than him, but it was just my imagination. I was always right. I was the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku, and always the most correct. After all, I had three people's worth of brains.

I was sucked in by the tornado. The sky turned bright white. I waited with great anticipation. If my destination was the Divine Throne, as predicted by the mitate, I would kill God. I would kill Him, become God myself, and go wherever I want at any point in time to find that guava girl. If instead I were to land in *Episode Six*, like how

the ‘me’ from *Episode Five* ended in *Episode Four*, I would spend my sweet time with Morimoto Yuuki, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, and, I guess technically, my mother-in-law.

No matter which path I may take, love lay before my eyes. I was a soul vibrating for love.

I wasn’t even 20 years old. I could still enjoy this love for over 100 years to come.

Episode 6
9+9+9
PEOPLE DIE.
GIRLS LEAVE.
CHILDREN MUST BE KEPT IN THE SAFE.
AND WHERE ARE MY PARENTS.?
MY SONS AND DAUGHTERS?
I'M OUT HERE ALONE
IN THE WILD WIDE WORLD.
Maijo Otaro

1

Reading the *Episode Seven* that ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ sent us yesterday around noon must have angered Yuuki—I hadn’t seen her since. I read it after her, and totally agreed with her opinion that there was no need whatsoever to include the mitate of the seven letters God had John write in the finale of *Episode Seven*. But I didn’t think so for the same reason as Yuuki; I just found that the seven letters mitate made *Episode Seven*’s already-flimsy balance even worse. As a mystery novel fan, Yuuki probably couldn’t forgive ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ for asking seven real authors to write the ‘story of God’ (JDC Series) in ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ (God)’s stead…or rather, Shimada Souji being one of those seven authors must have triggered her. The moment she finished reading *Episode Seven*, she screamed, “What is this shit!?” and threw the bundle of paper at the wall before also stomping on it. “The heck!? You *can’t* do that!” The cover page and the first page became a mess because of that. She then handed me the tattered manuscript and said, “Hey Tsutomu, read this. Now,” and waited for me to quickly read through it while repeatedly stamping her feet and, as soon as I raised my face from it, said, “Can you believe this crap? The part at the end. The fuck do you mean, ‘the toilet was clean,’ henceforth ‘Mitarai Kiyoshi’!?”

Yuuki was talking about the scene where ‘Tsukumojuuku’ tells ‘Tsutomu’ to note down God (‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’)’s words as letters to perform a mitate of the seven letters written to the seven churches in *Revelation to John* as he is being sucked in by the tornado at the end of *Episode Seven*. ‘Tsukumojuuku’ chose seven real authors to represent the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, but the reasoning behind said choices are quite far-fetched.

‘Tsukumojuuku’ asked ‘Tsutomu’ in God’s stead why were ‘Seshiru’ and ‘Serika’ living in a toilet in *Episode Four*, and why was that toilet (御手洗い) clean (清潔)? ‘Tsutomu’ couldn’t answer that. ‘Tsukumojuuku’ could: This was pointing at the great detective written by the author Souji Shimada, Mitarai Kiyoshi (御手洗潔). “Tsutomu,

‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ chose Shimada Souji for the church of Ephesus.”

‘Tsukumojuuku’ then told ‘Tsutomu’: The name ‘Seshiru’ is another indicator. The director of the movie *The Ten Commandments* is *Cecil* B. DeMille. Also, Albi, the origin point of the unorthodox Christian movement of Catharism, has the Cathédrale Sainte-*Cécile*, which is across the road of the Musée Toulouse-Lautrec. Albi is a city in Ariège, just like Toulouse, and if we connect Catharism, Toulouse, the *Revelation to John* mitate, and the arrows (矢) raining down (吹) from the sky in *Episode Seven*, we get the Great Detective Yabuki Kakeru in the novel *Summer Apocalypse*—‘Tsukumojuuku’ said. “Think about it, the culprit in *Summer Apocalypse* used the motif of the four horses unleashed upon opening the seals. These four horses—these four mitate’d horses are in no way God’s horses. They are the Four Horses of Calamities. And if you put together the kanji for calamity (凶) and horse (馬), you get the name Yabuki Kakeru (矢吹駆); ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ has chosen his God and creator, Kasai Kiyoshi.”

‘Tsukumojuuku’ went on: There is also meaning behind the title of *Summer Apocalypse* coming up here. summer is written 夏. And in *Episode Four*, I found an adult magazine near Midori Park’s clean toilet. An adult magazine = erotic book = erohon/エロホン. Here, ホ becomes 木, and ン becomes ヌ. Erohon = エロ木ヌ, and エ + ロ + 木 + ヌ = 極. “Tsutomu, if you also keep in mind that you and I were also born in Kyoto (京都), the author designated by 京, 極, and 夏 is Kyougoku Natsuhiko (京極夏彦). Furthermore, ‘hiko’ (彦) is homonymous to ‘delinquency’ (非行; hikou), which would explain why Kyougoku Natsuhiko’s editor at Kodansha Novels, ‘Oota Katsushi,’ was assaulted and killed by delinquents. ‘Hiko’ can also be ‘take flight’ (飛行; hikou), which explains why ‘I’ had to fly out of my burning house to chase after ‘Seshiru’ in *Episode Five*. ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ has also chosen Kyougoku Natsuhiko.”

Next, ‘Tsukumojuuku’ said, “The magazine *Castle of Illusions* comes up in in the Castle of Illusions in *Episode Four*, and that, combined with the structure of the novels ‘Seiryouin Ryuusui’ keeps sending ‘me’ where each chapter is framed inside the subsequent one, gives us the author who used similar meta-narrative structures in both his debut

novel which was serialized in the magazine *Castle of Illusions*, *Paradise Lost Inside the Box*, and his Ouroboros Series: Takemoto Kenji. Furthermore, the fact that 'Ryuuguu Jounosuke' didn't make the author Satou Yuuya into the culprit despite his name coming up twice in *Episode Three*, indicates that 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' has chosen Satou Yuuya."

'Tsukumojuuku' then talked about how, in the scene where 'I' pushed the Cross House in *Episode Seven*, the fact that I considered pushing the vertical axis off the cliff and making it slide atop the cedar trees down the forest, which might destroy the Katou house at the base of the mountain, but didn't do any of that showed 'my' will (意志) of bringing peace (平和) to the entire world by keeping (保) the Cross House on that hill (坂). Keeping it on the hill = 保坂. Will of peace = 和志. "Tsutomu, 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' has also chosen the author Hosaka Kazushi (保坂和志). The fact that he, who based many of his novels such as *Cat at Night* and *The Timeflow of a Cat* on the motif of cats, justifies why Hirose Neko had to show up as the Great Detective Nekoneko Nyannyannyan in *Episode Two*.

At last, 'Tsukumojuuku' said: And the fact that the Cross House slid above that cedar forest, even just as a possibility, naturally leads us to one level (一寸) above (上) trees (木), henceforth Murakami (村上). Also remember that there are three (三人) 'Tsukumojuuku's and that the Cross House Case in *Episode Seven* happened on the tenth (十日) of September. Also the edamame beans (豆) 'Rie' forgot to buy at the start of *Episode Five*. If you put together 三, 人, 十, 日, 豆, as well as the elements that composed 村上, you get Haruki (春樹). "Thus, the seventh church is Murakami Haruki (村上春樹), Tsutomu."

However, Yuuki wasn't mad at the far-fetched logic, but rather at the fact that her favorite great detective, Mitarai Kiyoshi, was encrypted by 'toilets being clean.' "This 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' asshole doesn't care about people's feelings! Doesn't he fucking realize how hard it must have been for Mitarai-san to grow up bearing the name 'Mitarai Kiyoshi'?!" She appeared to be mad on behalf of a fictional character she empathized with, but she wasn't actually angry—in

reality, she was merely perturbed because *Episode Seven* had a cat named 'Igera-kun' living in a 'tatami store.' After all, the household of Yuuki, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, my mother-in-law, and I had a cat literally named 'Igera-kun,' and my job—which I was doing from home—was renovating the faces of old tatami mats, meaning our house was precisely a 'tatami store.'

Yuuki still wasn't coming back, so I just re-sewed the hems of a tatami, pushed back doing the lapel to the afternoon, and moved to the living space of the house. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were rewatching *My Neighbor Totoro* yet again. "Wow, you guys still aren't tired of it?" I asked them, to which they replied, "We aren't~," in sync. They realized their voices overlapped perfectly and laughed. Totoro said "Gao~" as he flew into the sky, and the triplets each screamed something of their own before laughing and rolling on the floor. They seemed to be having fun.

When I headed to the kitchen, Igera-kun followed me with a *Maah*. Igera-kun was, how to put it, kind of an ill-spirited cat; the kind that might extort money from little kids in elementary or middle school. Even just now, he briefly glanced at me before heading straight for my feet and sticking to them. Being followed by him makes it harder to change the direction in which I was walking. I would feel bad if I betrayed his expectations. Well, I was headed for the kitchen right now so I didn't have to face that problem. When I would go to the toilet, behind the kitchen, I'd have to leave him in the kitchen which was kinda awkward. And betraying his expectations once more after coming out of the toilet added another layer of awkwardness.

My mother-in-law was preparing lunch in the kitchen. Last night she suddenly screamed "You damn cheeky cat!" at Igera-kun, to which he answered, from atop her lap, "Fkaah!" starting a whole fight between the two of them before he finally retreated to the second floor, ending that world war, but not the subsequent cold war yet. Igera-kun slowed down his pace upon seeing her in the kitchen. "Mother-in-law, have you heard from Yuuki?" "Now that you mention it, I haven't. Isn't she out on a stroll or sleeping in her bedroom?" I

grabbed a can of *Set Ready Cat!* from the shelf, opened it, took its contents out with a spoon, and put that down on Igera-kun's plate. He was pressing me in English by crying *Naw*, but as soon as he got the food, he buried his face into it. The plate was empty before that, apparently he hadn't gotten anything for breakfast. I put down the empty can next to the plate. Igera-kun would surely lick it clean later. I served the steamed beef and celery as well as the boiled daikon and grated carrots my mother-in-law had prepared on the table, tried calling Yuuki's phone, but to no avail—her phone seemed turned off. The triplets paused their movie before getting the news that Mei and Satsuki's mother wouldn't come back from the hospital, and ran to the living room. We then waited for Yuuki to come back for some more, but we couldn't get a hold of her on the phone and didn't have other means to, so since the food would get cold and the triplets kept letting it known how hungry they were, we started eating by ourselves. Honest, who'd been moving his chopsticks with great enthusiasm at first, started crying. "Where's mom~?" Which made me realize: He had seen *My Neighbor Totoro* hundreds of times; he knew full well what happened after the scene where they eat cucumbers in the fields. He was taking Mei and Satsuki's worries about their mother not coming back for his own, as if the two situations were the same. When he started crying, Tolerant and Sincere also called for their mom and broke into tears, either because they'd felt the same way, or because Honest's feelings had spread to them. My mother-in-law said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, don't worry, she'll be back any second now," as she threw me a glance telling me to call her once more. It didn't go through. I got the voice message, "The phone you are calling is either outside of our services' range or isn't functioning, please [...]" but didn't hang up; I said, "Oh, Yuuki? Yeah, we already started eating~." Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest stopped crying on the spot and looked at me. "Yeah, yeah, oh, the triplets?" I said, looking at them. They all wiped the tears from their eyes. "Hear that out, they're crying because you're not here, hah hah," I said, to which they objected, "Huh? I'm not crying!" "I'm not crying, I'm really not," "I'm not crying, dad!" so I said "My bad, looks like they're not crying actually," to the phone.

“Yeah, oh, okay, we’ll be waiting then.” I hung up. “Mom can’t be here quite yet, but she’ll be back soon,” I told the triplets. “Where is mom?” Tolerant asked. “At the Catbus stop,” I answered whatever came to my mind. Sincere then said, “The Catbus isn’t real!” so Tolerant and Sincere both said, “There’s no Catbus, Dad.” “Huh? What, you don’t know about it? It’s very real,” I said. “Ehh~,” they looked at each other. If Yuuki was here, she would surely scold me for telling random lies. My mother-in-law was eating in silence. She had gone through her fair share of inexplicable experiences, so she acted like it might actually exist. Right when the triplets started asking for proof, the phone rang. I answered it. “You’re speaking to Morimoto, the tatami repairman.” The triplets asked “Mom?” “Is it mom?” but this call didn’t come from Yuuki.

“Ughhhh, *sniff*, ghhh, *sniff*.” A man was sobbing. He sounded young.

“Can you hear me?” I said. “Who do you want to speak to?”

“Nghhh! Mmmnnhn! H-Hayashi Izumi and, *sniff*, Sasaki...Azusa, *sniff*, and Hirose Neko are d-dead. They’ve been killed.”

“...”

“They died! Aah, ahhh, they’re dead! Aaaah! I loved, *sniff*, I loved them so much!”

“Who are—”

“Tsukumojuuku! It’s all your fault!”

“...Excuse me, you may you—”

“It’s all, nhm, *sniff*, nnhn, it’s all your fault! Raaaaah, it’s your fault! Mgh, *sniff*, i-it’s your fault!”

“What happened? What do you mean by Hayashi Izumi-san, Sasaki Azusa-san, and Hirose Neko-san?”

“I- khhhh, *sniff*, nnhm, I don’t mean shit! It’s your fauuuuult! Th-that they all d-died!”

“Who are—”

“I’ll fucking kill you, Tsukumojuuku! I will kill you whatever it takes!”

Listen, I thought to myself. I had heard this voice before. I had heard it a lot at some point. I had heard it in many instances. Whose

voice was it?

"Aaaaah! M-my Izumi! My Azusa! My Neko! Why did you, nnnnhm, why did you kill the girls I loved?! Tsukumojuuku!"

The man's sobbing and cries seemed to resonate in the room; the triplets were staring at me.

I stood up. The man yelled.

"AAAAAAH! I hate you so much! I can't contain all this hate! I'll kill you! ...Even the children they were bearing! E-even them! Raaaah, *cough*, nnhm, you stole them from me! Mghhhh, *sniff*, aaah! My children! Give my children back! Give my children back!"

I left the living room and hung up. The phone rang again. I let it ring, walked up to the base unit, and unplugged the jack cord from the wall.

That man's voice was mine.

It had started, I thought. I was in Seiryouin Ryuusui's *Episode Six*. *Episode Seven* had arrived before *Episode Six*, which meant that someone had timeslipped and moved to another world, like in the *Episode Five-Four* situation. After being sucked up by the tornado next to the Cross House in *Episode Seven*'s last scene, 'I' landed in *Episode Six* and not the Divine Throne. But why would the me from *Episode Seven* lament over 'Hayashi Izumi,' 'Sasaki Azusa,' and 'Hirose Neko's' death so much? I didn't get it.

Think, a girl's voice told me.

Who was that? I didn't know. I'd never heard that voice.

"Think."

'Hayashi Izumi,' 'Sasaki Azusa," and 'Hirose Neko' were employees at an accounting firm in Toyota City, Toyama Prefecture. They got along very well and often ate lunch together. Yesterday too, the weather was nice so they went up to the roof of the 20-floor building their office was located in, and ate lunch there. And then I killed

them. Tsukumojuuku decapitated all three of them. You drew a sun, moon, and star mark on their foreheads. And then ate a bit of each of their faces. I then placed the three heads atop a water tower before slicing each of their bellies open and taking out the three babies. Tsukumojuuku then devoured the yet-to-be-named babies on the spot. Right when you finished eating the babies, someone knocked on the door leading to the roof. I had locked it with a key I'd stolen beforehand, but it wouldn't take long before they got a hold of a spare and opened it. You escaped from that 350-meter-high roof.

How?

Here is how:

I undressed the girls, ripped their clothes, and used them to create six short ropes and one long one. He then tied Hayashi Izumi's hands to Sasaki Azusa's legs, and Sasaki Azusa's hands to Hirose Neko's legs. That done, you then split each of their upper and lower halves at their stomach level. I had severed their uteruses to take out the children, but I hadn't damaged their bowels. Tsukumojuuku cut through their skin, muscle, and pointless blood vessels with his knife, making sure to spare their intestines. I then tied Hirose Neko's hands to the fence on the edge of the roof and dropped the bodies over it. Their intestines stretched and formed a long, connected rope. I hurriedly went down that rope. People could open that door and come in any second, but that wasn't the biggest reason—you had preemptively set the rope connecting Hirose Neko's hands to the fence on fire. Tsukumojuuku reached the ground before it fully burned down and Hirose Neko's hands fell off. Now covered in blood due to the intestine rope, you waited for the flames to free Hirose Neko from the fence and these three to drop to the ground. Once they'd slammed into the ground, I collected the ropes and swiftly damaged their intestines with my knife before leaving.

With that, they were all decapitated, had bizarre drawings on their faces, were missing the children in their stomachs, but also completely ripped apart in half and seemed like they'd been throw off the roof; nobody should be able to tell how Tsukumojuuku got off that roof after killing them.

The burn marks left on Hirose Neko's arms could clue someone in, but nobody will know what you've done unless a great detective were to butt in.

Nor would they get the meaning behind these three marks.

And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise.

These three girls were my sun, my moon, and my star. You loved them. Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, and Hirose Neko brightened Tsukumojuuku's day and shone upon his nights.

2

I picked up Tolerant and Sincere, who were stuffing their cheeks with daikon and carrots, and said to my mother-in-law, "Mother-in-law, please take Honest with you and follow me." Seeing me acting out of the ordinary, she abided in silence. She grabbed Honest as he was aiming for a piece of beef with his chopsticks, and stood up. I took the four of them to the entrance where we put our shoes on, then left the house and ran to the garage. There was my mother-in-law's Alfa Romeo inside. I had Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest sit on the backseat. I let my mother-in-law get in the passenger seat before handing her her wallet and phone. "I'm going to search for Yuuki. I'll call you when I find her, so please stay on the move until then; don't ever stop. Don't leave this car under any circumstances. I will call you from my own phone. I'll make two one-rings before calling you. Don't pick up any calls other than this one, even if you see my number displayed. Okay? The call will end as soon as it starts ringing. If you see that happening twice, only then it's me calling. I'll call you for real after that, so please pick up on the third instance. Do you get it?" She nodded. "All clear. But, do you know where Yuuki is?" I shook my head. "I don't. But I'll think." She acted surprised. "Oh! You're finally

willing to use your head, eh. I'm proud of you, Tsutomu-san. We've all been waiting for that. Best of luck to you." "Thank you. You too, be careful." "Tsutomu-san, is this trip dangerous?" I hesitated for a moment, and ultimately nodded. "Yes." She then finally put up a smile. "You know, I do like danger. A life of only repairing tatami is just boring." *Haha*, I laughed. "Making and repairing tatami has its fun moments, still." She turned the key and started up the Alfa Romeo. "Really? Different strokes for different folks, I guess. But I'm glad Yuuki-chan found a good man. A handsome one too. Tsutomu-san, could you remove your sunglasses and show me your face?" I took them off. She didn't faint. Naturally. Instead, she leaned her slender body forward and rested her head on the wheel for a few seconds before jolting, followed by a long sigh. "Phew. I'm all hot in my chest and down there now. My panties are a giant mess inside." She inserted the palm of her hand in the crotch of her tight jeans. "Please, not now, Mother-in-law." "You're just too beautiful, Tsutomu-san. So much it's scary." "Thank you." I put my sunglasses back on. She got away from the handle and sat straight. "Tsutomu-san, I'm counting on you to find Yuuki," she said before stepping on the gas pedal and heading out in the Alfa Romeo. I sent her and the triplets off by waving at them. The triplets turned around in the backseat and waved at me through the rear window. The Alfa Romeo briefly sounded its klaxon before disappearing in the distance.

Now came the time to find Yuuki.

I cut off my own head to help me in finding Yuuki.

I returned to the house after sending the Alfa Romeo off, but found my own head lying in front of the front door. I took a few steps back. My head was there, bleeding. I squinted my eyes and vacantly stared into nothing. For some reason, a rope was coiled threefold around it vertically, forming a loop above my head. It was a handle to move it around. Someone had grabbed this handle and brought that head here. It was clearly my face. I was still alive. Another me had

died. I looked at the sky; thick and dark clouds were noisily aggregating above Chofu. I could distinguish a dark whirlpool. That whirlpool had dropped off many mes from many eras. A me to protect Yuuki and a me to kill Yuuki. I got away from the house. I headed towards Keio-Tamagawa. There were heads of mine, wrapped in the same manner, on both sides of the road, so I knew not to approach houses. I then arrived at the crossroad near Keio-Tamagawa Station and suddenly spotted my face straight ahead in my path. My coiled face was warped in fear, its eyes rolled up and its mouth open onto my red tongue; it looked at though it was there to block the way. I looked on my left: there was my severed head. I looked on my right: there was nothing. I took that path. I knew. My severed heads blocking my way acted like the barrier stones used to guide customers in teahouse gardens. The owner of this world was guiding me. I took a turn every time a head appeared in my path. I would surely find Yuuki at the end of the path my heads were drawing for me.

I cut off my own head to prevent me from finding Yuuki.

I hurried over to Yuuki by following the guidance of my heads while listening to the screams of other pedestrians. Something abruptly fell from the sky and hit someone from a crowd of people unsure where to escape to, who collapsed. An old lady dragging her bicycle along, with one foot resting on the pedals as she bawled in tears, was about to pass by my side when something raining from the sky hit her head and made her fall down. The cucumbers, onions, and such spilled out from the supermarket bag that fell out of her front basket. The woman was dead. She'd been killed by my head. I looked at the sky. Countless round silhouettes were crossing the scenery. These were all my heads, coiled with ropes. They were scattering all over the city. Now I couldn't tell which ones were meant as barrier stones. 'Hide a leaf in the forest, hide a head in a mountain of heads.' One person should only have one head, and yet I had countless identical heads. It was the tornado's fault. There were too many of me.

But these fake barrier stones of mine were not spouted out by the tornado's mouth. They seemed to be sent out radially from one spot. For starters, I headed towards the source shooting my heads out. My heads kept raining around me as I progressed through the residential area. What a bizarre rain. This would be sure to remain etched in history for the next millennium.

I observed the arcs formed by the heads flying through the sky as I ran, and finally arrived at Second Chofu South High School's sports grounds, where there was a catapult launching my severed heads one after the other in its center. It looked just like a Middle-Ages weapon, but had a small motor installed onto it. When a head was placed on the arm, it would then rotate and send it into the distance. It was operating similarly to old pitching machines. There was nobody around the apparatus. I approached the catapult. My dismembered corpses formed a big pile next to it. Just like a nazi concentration camp that had to pile up the Jews they'd killed with gas and cremate them because they couldn't afford to bury everyone.

I had been massacred.

By whom?

Me.

Where was the me shooting all my heads out? I looked around the Second Chofu South High School's grounds. There was nobody. *Shoop*, *shoop*, *shoop*, my rope-coiled heads were still being sent out into the city of Chofu. The prepared heads slowly ran out until the last one was shot, after which the arm swinging back and forth and hitting the wooden stop became the only thing to make any sound in the surroundings. I severed the belt and stopped the motor. The catapult's arm stopped moving. I could now hear the faraway screams from the residents. Of course they would be scared if a bunch of severed heads fell from the sky. Not to mention, they all belonged to the same person. Many people must have been injured or died after being hit by my heads.

I figured out the location of the me that had been shooting my heads out. 'Hide a leaf in the forest. Hide a head in a mountain of heads. Hide me in a mountain of mes.' I looked up at the mountain

composed of my slaughtered corpses and thought:

And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.

I entered a school building, headed for the faculty office, and took a lighter out of a random teacher's desk. Another desk had bug spray, so I also grabbed that before returning to the grounds. The students had come out into the hallways and were nervously looking at me from behind the windows. I walked up to the mountain of corpses and held up the bug spray. I lit the lighter in front of the nozzle and made it expel gas, which ignited and formed a pale fire along with a noise of conflagration. My corpses started to burn. This was Wormwood. It had literally fallen from heaven. I went around the corpse mountain and set it on fire in a few dozen spots. The pile, which looked to be composed of hundreds of my corpses, was burning as if it was a lamp. I could hear muffled screaming. However, I couldn't tell if that came from the me being burned alive while buried in a mountain of my corpses, or from students who had seen me set the mountain of my corpses on fire from afar and got scared at the sudden flames. I didn't need to know. This time, there was no need to think.

It didn't matter either way.

I walked away from the burning Wormwood. A fire truck would soon arrive and spray it with water. Wormwood would be doused with underground Chofu water, and if that didn't suffice, it would also be doused with water from the Tamagawa River. If that came to pass, Wormwood would fall upon the fountains of water and the rivers.

It would all fall under the mitate.

The burning me's bodily fluids or ashes might even seep into the soil, reach the underground water, and make it bitter. Many people

might die because of it.

3

Tsukumojuuku sliced Satou Emiko from Toyama City, Aichi Prefecture in half and took out her organs. However, this wasn't to create a rope out of her intestines, to hide inside her belly, nor to wear her skin; it was to return the triplets Satou Emiko had given birth to inside her own belly. I stuffed the three children inside Satou Emiko, then sewed her belly shut. 'Satou Emiko has yet to give birth to children.' 'Satou Emiko's children have returned inside Satou Emiko's womb.' This was, in other words, the opposite of the mitate Seshiru, Serika, and I had performed in West Akatsuki. These children would surely die a slow death inside her belly.

The Satou Emiko you loved. Satou Emiko had told me, "You're cursed, you know that? You can till the earth all you want, it won't produce anything. You're damned to be a vagabond on Earth. But because of that malediction, whoever slays you will find themselves cursed sevenfold." Satou Emiko was correct. Someone one can love from the bottom of their heart is the kind of person who can say such correct things to them. I, indeed, couldn't produce anything. I was merely a vagabond on Earth. And due to this curse, the Tsukumojuuku who killed Tsukumojuuku would find himself cursed sevenfold.

You then headed to Chofu and killed Umi. You picked up one of my heads shot out from the Second Chofu South High School and hit her with it, killing her on the spot. Many people had died from my heads landing on them, so Umi would be deemed one of these victims. 'Hide a leaf in the forest, and hide someone beaten to death with one of my heads amongst the many people killed by my heads raining down upon them.' A special death hidden amongst a plurality. In reality, even when it comes to mass-produced deaths, each one is special if examined individually. However, their large amount makes it infeasible to process them one by one, leaving their individualities on the wayside, hidden. The death of someone special to another, no

matter how it went down, will always be special to that person. That is, regardless of whether they wished to die a privileged death.

The Umi Tsukumojuuku loved. I would have done anything for her. Tsukumojuuku saw fear no longer when it came to her. I would have done anything in my power without an ounce of hesitation. You were going to make this entire world shine for Umi. I felt desolate without Umi. I was sad. I wanted to die. I would probably actually die quite soon—being killed by myself.

I devoured the three children Umi had given birth to before I had a chance of killing myself. My children became my blood, my flesh, and my bones. My children fused with me, their father, both on a physiological and spiritual level. My and my triplets' souls combined into one. The Trinity can also be completed this way.

I then found Rie and captured her. Rie cried. She wailed. She tried to flee from me. Tsukumojuuku grieved. Rie. My everything. You don't amount to anything without Rie's existence. You weren't anything before you met Rie. You were the void. Rie had given my vain existence meaning. I truly loved her. I loved her from the bottom of my heart. I could feel true happiness and satisfaction from living with her. It was a miracle. And yet, despite having bestowed this miracle onto me, I captured Rie, beat her, carried her unconscious on my shoulder, and brought her to Yashiro Umi's house. Her three children hit me, asking for me to give their mother back. You let them do that. They'd ended up accompanying Rie and me all the way to Umi's residence. You stepped over Umi's corpse in front of the entrance, picked up your own head, and killed her in one strike like you'd done with Umi. I then placed her on top of Umi. The children screamed and cried. Tsukumojuuku entered Umi's house and grabbed a bottle of whisky from a shelf. You poured the alcohol over Rie and Umi's corpses, then set them on fire. Rie was the most precious thing in the world to me.

And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great

mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea.[2]

Tsukumojuuku cooked Rie's children on that fire and yet again devoured them.

4

My phone was assaulted with calls. All of them came from me. I was crying. I was bawling. I was losing myself in screams of pure hatred. I was tormenting myself with grief. And I blamed myself.

"I wish you never were born. You should've died an eternity ago."

"I can't make any sense of it anymore... What are you planning on doing to this world? What will you do, now that you've killed the ones you loved and lost those you ought to keep loving for eternity? What can you do? What will you do and how exactly?"

"I won't do shit! I don't have anything! It's all gone! I've nothing to live for anymore, I can't find any value in keeping on living! Why can you kill the other mes but not me?! Please, just kill me! I don't want to live one more second in this damn world! I don't give a shit about a world devoid of things I hold dear! Please! Please, kill me! Kill me, me, me, me, you, and all the other mes!"

I didn't answer.

"Say something! Anything!" Tsukumojuuku said, but I didn't respond. I was searching for Yuuki. I was in a hurry. Ishida Rie had already been killed. All my lovers from episode two to five were now dead. The next one was Morimoto Yuuki, the one from this world. I couldn't afford to lend an ear to my grief, anger, or rage.

I observed the barrier-stone heads. The real ones had obviously been murdered before the fake barrier stones, so they differed in a few ways. First, the temperature: they cooled down about one degree every hour. I barged inside a drug store as the city was in mayhem and bought a thermometer. But that was a just-in-case. I had no time to measure every single head's temperature. I checked their lividity. I gauged how far their livor mortis had progressed. I observed how much their pupils had dilated. That was enough to distinguish which

barrier stone was real and which was fake, so I continued in my path, choosing the real ones.

And I finally found Yuuki in front of the fountain at Chofu Station's south entrance. What a relief. Tsukumojuuku must've found it hard to attack her with all the people around.

"Yuuki!" I called for her name. She turned back and spotted me. When I drew closer to her, she started running away. Ohh, since she'd read *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Five*, *Four*, and *Episode Seven* in order, maybe she'd realized all my past lovers were progressively being killed when looking at the news on the internet. She might've accessed such sites with her phone. And she must've anticipated me coming to kill her. But I couldn't let her go. "Yuuki! It's me! Don't go! You don't need to run! It's me! It's Tsutomu!" I shouted. She took the stairs to below Chofu Station without throwing a single glance back. I went after her. She was fast. I might not have been able to catch up. What could I say to her so she would know it's me? I had no intention of killing her. "Yuuki! I love you, Yuuki! I love you!" The students by the fountain exploded in laughter hearing me. I paid no heed to them and ran down the station stairs after Yuuki. When I broke the corner, a piece of wood hit me in the face, turning my vision blank, and making me collapse onto the concrete path. I was on the verge of losing consciousness. When I could finally look up, Yuuki was crouching by my head. She'd stopped running away and came back to me. There was another girl by her side. Who was she? I had no idea. But I knew who the person next to that girl was: me. Tsukumojuuku. Yuuki lifted my head. Intense pain coursed through me. Yuuki was crying. "Tsutomu! Tsutomu! Are you okay? Tsutomu! What the hell, Tsushima, that was too far! That might kill him!"

Tsushima? Oh, Tsushima Takako.

"It's fine," the other me said. "This Tsukumojuuku is to be blamed for all of this world's crimes."

Tsushima Takako clung to the other me. Wow, congrats you two, I thought. That me must've been the 'me' who got sucked up by the tornado at the Cross House in *Episode Seven*. He didn't have three heads. We had the same face. An overly-beautiful face. Any girl would

wet their panties upon seeing that face naked of any sunglasses.

I fainted in the underground path below Chofu Station on Yuuki's lap. Right before I fully lost consciousness, I picked up a glimpse of a 'guava' scent from Tsushima Takako. So sweet...

When I next woke up, I was in a hotel room, my arms and legs tied to the bed with ropes. Yuuki was sleeping next to me. Tsukumojuuku and Tsushima Takako were on the other side. Tsukumojuuku seated on the sofa, and Tsushima Takako sleeping on his knees. Tsukumojuuku noticed I'd woken up and said, "Good morning, Third."

Third, eh. Indeed.

"It sure isn't morning, Second," I said. "My head hurts."

"You have a benign concussion," Second said. "Which is natural, my aim wasn't to kill you. I couldn't quite imagine how this world would change if you were to die. I didn't want the supernatural to come in and turn the story into yet another *Episode Four*, you see. Your headache will go away soon. Do you need water or anything?"

"No thanks. Where are we?" I asked.

"I can't tell you," Second said. "You're the one making this world. If you knew where we were, you might get all sorts of weird people to come in, or make another case occur."

I looked around the room. I could tell this was a hotel. A business hotel. A room with three-quarter beds, lamps, a closet, a desk set, and a mirror stand. But none of the furniture stood out enough to give me any further indication on the hotel. I checked the glasses on top of the fridge, but all bags or wrappings with the hotel's name had been carefully hidden.

Second said, "I want to first tell you that my wish is to preserve this world. I'm with the girl I love, after all. 'Tolerant', 'Sincere,' and 'Honest' are yet to be, but they are bound to appear if I stay with Takako. Though they might not necessarily be triplets. I've discarded everything to get my hands on Takako and my triplets."

I said, "I know that. I've read that already."

"I have too," Second said. "I borrowed it from Yuuki."

“Yuuki? Don’t be so familiar with her,” I said.

Heh, Second laughed. “Think about it, Yuuki is my lover in my memory too, you know? Just like how Izumi, Azusa, Neko, Emiko, Rie, and Umi are to you. These six are also my memory lovers. I just have Yuuki in addition to them.”

“I told you not to be so familiar,” I said. “She might only exist as a lover in your memory, but she’s real to me.”

“They’re the same. But fine. It *is* common sense that exes shouldn’t act too familiar to their past lovers, my excuses. I shall call her ‘Morimoto-san’ from now on. That out of the way, we can’t afford to be wasting time on this. There is still another Tsukumojuuku searching for us outside.”

“Yeah, First.”

“The original.”

“So are we copies created by the timeslips of *Episode Five* and *Episode Seven*?”

“I guess so. Though we aren’t too different from the original. And it’s not like any of his experiences are real in any capacity either. This is all happening inside a story. But, well, if we are to hypothetically consider dreams as reality, then here is what the original has ‘experienced’: *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, then *Four 1* and *Five 1*, followed by *Four 2* and *Five 2* because of the timeslip, then *Six 1*, *Seven 1*, and another timeslip causing him to currently be inside *Six 2*. It’s a whole ordeal. Not to mention he’s experienced all of that while inheriting all of our sinister aspects. Anyway, these additional experiences provoked a superfluous ‘growth’ in him which led to the current massacre. You understand what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“Of course. We share the same brain. In other words, to the original, the *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Five*, *Four*, and *Seven* I’ve read are merely *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Five 1*, *Four 2*, and *Seven 1*. So the ‘me’ from the *Episode Four* I’ve read (*Episode Four 2*) wasn’t the original, but a different Tsukumojuuku, a copy instantiated by the timeslip. And that’s you, right?”

“Exactly,” Second said.

“And now we are in the second parallel world, *Episode Six 2*, you

created by reverting from *Episode Seven 1* to the world of *Episode Six*... Which makes me the third one. Will we return...well, *I* can't use that word, but will we go to the Cross House in *Episode Seven 2*?"

"Quite possibly," Second said. "This might be a parallel world, but we're going through the same timeline. Most of the same events will occur. We're not deciding everything on our own will. When *Episode Seven 2* comes around, no matter how strongly we reject it, we might be obligated to head to the Cross House. In *Episode Seven*, the original 'me' hypothesized the other 'Tsukumojuuku' to have been sent down by a wormhole supposedly forming inside the tornado, but was later denied by the hallucinatory 'Tsukumojuuku.' However, that idea might actually hit on the truth. I suspect that *should* have been the truth, but was twisted by the original and God in a complex manner. We can pull on that thread later on; what matters is that Tsukumojuuku's wishes can alter the world. After all, we're in a forceful world that doesn't shy away from sucking up other Tsukumojuukus from distant eras and sending them to us. We have no guarantee a tornado won't suddenly swallow us and drop us at the Cross House any moment."

"Hmm."

"No need to worry about *Episode Seven 2*. Focus on *Six 2* right now. The original is currently desperate to grow."

"Grow, huh. Can murder result in any growth, though?"

"We're in a story. This is fake, fictitious, nothing is actually real. The reality here doesn't have to match with the one outside. What's deemed immoral in the real world is actively sought after here, in stories. That's why the original is murdering his memory's lovers and devouring his children without the slightest hesitation. The original thinks that the decision at the end of *Episode Seven* was mistaken. He doesn't want to retract himself into a world made only out of delusions and fantasy; he wishes for independence, and to accomplish that, he's killing everything he'd been relying upon in this world. That moron's seriously intending on going back to Tsutomu—to West Akatsuki."

"..."

“What’s the plan if Suzuki-kun comes home? He will get his eyes gouged, his nose shaved off, his ear cut off, and what? Is he going to endure all of that, maybe?”

“...I feel like trying to accept your own deformity is the right direction to go in, though.”

“I know. But the price for that is us losing our lovers. Losing our cute children. When we lose all of that and return to reality, all that’s waiting for us is a face on our right and another on our left, you know? The principle of three heads resulting in Manjushri’s wisdom is still valid inside this story. Be it in reality or in a story, Tsukumojuuku remains a genius. Why would he abandon reality just to reveal his deformed self? I mean, I don’t care if I’m deformed or whatever; that doesn’t matter in the slightest to me. But I will not allow anyone to rob the girl I love away from me. I couldn’t bear losing my children. I’m perfectly fine with not knowing who I truly am because of my wife and children. Just let me be that way. I love Takako. Only a fool would throw away what they once loved and obtained on their own volition. Correcting your cognition of yourself isn’t *that* important.”

“I’m not entirely sure where I stand,” I said. I looked at Yuuki, sleeping next to me. I couldn’t believe she was a byproduct of someone’s imagination. I could see her cheeks and even the fuzz on the tip of her nose. Yuuki had a black spot next to her left eye’s pupil on her eyeball she got from a boy stabbing her with the lead of his pencil while messing around in their third year of elementary school. When that incident happened, Yuuki was just somewhat puzzled and didn’t cry. The boy holding the pencil, however, did cry. His name was Ochii Tadashi. In their fifth year, Ochii Tadashi confessed to Yuuki, and they dated for a year, kissing seven times, before breaking up. They were still on good terms and went out drinking every now and then with other friends. Because she’d been so preoccupied by the pencil scar and was constantly touching it, Yuuki could hold her eyeball between her fingers and slightly pull it out, but every time she did it at parties everyone freaked out, so she stopped showing that trick to people other than me. She’d had two serious romances. One was with me. She’d had five painful heartbreaks. One serious one-

sided love. She'd kissed Mari-chan, her friend in middle school, about ten times after classes. Apparently, Mari-chan was really pretty and a lesbian, so Yuuki yielded to her advances and allowed kisses but no more than that. By the way, these ten kisses single-handedly trampled over her secret top ten kiss ranking at the time. She'd told me she loved me countless times. She'd expressed how dear I was to her. We had so many movies we planned on seeing together. There were many places we wanted to visit together. There were many places we wanted to return to together.

"Yeah, I love Yuuki as well," I said. "Turns out, I can't picture a life without her."

Second nodded. "I bet. Well, shall we kill the original, then? This story will end here. The world of *Episode Six 2* will remain inside our bodies as a memory, and you'll probably continue narrating *Episode Seven 2*, so you'll get to make new memories with Takako."

"But what will happen to you in *Episode Seven 2*?" I asked. "Takako-san would be dating me, wouldn't she?"

"This conversation should reach you as *Episode Six*. And saving another timeslip occurring right away, *Episode Seven* should remain the *Seven 1* version and we'll skip straight to *Episode Eight* without *Seven 2* ever being told. At least, assuming it works similarly to *Five* and *Four*."

"But what will happen if we complete the *Revelation to John* and *Genesis* mitate within *Episode Six*?"

"Beats me," Second said. "That's none of my concern. If this means my story ends here, I'm fine with it. Still, *Episode Seven* treated the first six seals to be opened. So the remaining mitate are the seventh seal and the first angel's first trumpet. Heading to *Episode Eight* without taking care of them would create chronological incongruences. So there probably won't be an *Episode Eight*. All will meet its end in *Episode Six*. At any rate, I want to be alongside Takako whenever the world comes to an end. When *Episode Six* concludes, I want to be with Takako. I truly love her."

"Yeah."

"That's why I'll kill anyone trying to rob her from me."

"..."

"To begin with, Tsukumojuuku chose to embrace his love even if that meant living in a delusional world at the end of *Episode Seven*. It doesn't quite make sense for him to suddenly turn on his heels in *Episode Six*. But fine. Anyway, I want to find the original. And I want you to help me with that."

"...There's still something that doesn't sit right with me," I said. I looked at Tsushima Takako, sleeping in the arms of the second me. "The conversation with Tsushima-san at the start of *Episode Seven*. She confronted you with her love. She repeated how much she loved you. But she also told you to head to the Cross House. This is pretty much telling you—and me, on the same occasion—to go find out who you truly are. So Tsushima-san surely hoped you would discover that all your past lovers: Yuuki, Hayashi Izumi, Sasaki Azusa, Hirose Neko, Satou Emiko, Yashiro Umi, and Ishida Rie, are byproducts of Tsukumojuuku's delusions, and furthermore that your children: Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest, are byproducts of your ego being projected onto imaginary children. Which means she must have been aware that she would vanish from Tsukumojuuku's world. She also kept telling you how scared she was, so it's safe to assume Tsushima-san was fully ready to disappear from your world."

The second Tsukumojuuku made a pained face hearing my words.

"What of it?"

"Put another way, preserving this world would actually go against Tsushima-san's true intention."

"That's wrong, Third. Don't you remember, Takako also told me to remember her arms enlacing me. She told me to come back to her as soon as I was done with the case in Fukui. That's why I'm back."

"Yeah."

"Takako asked me to come back to her."

"Yeah. But I'm also envisioning another possibility: that even after accepting our own deformity and losing this delusional world, Tsushima-san might still remain for us; Tsushima-san might still exist in the real world.

"..."

“Well, that wouldn’t quite be the same Tsushima-san, but I’m thinking another Tsushima-san might be waiting for us in the outside world.”

“Nobody would ever love the ugly me with three faces!”

When he said that with Tsushima Takako sleeping on his knees, I saw, for a very brief moment, the second Tsukumojuuku’s true form. I really had three heads. The skulls fused in the back, and the three brains were probably connected too. Also, Suzuki-kun’s fingernail marks. The middle face had no eyeballs, nose, or ears. On top of that, the flesh on that face had been softened by many injuries and looked as though it was rotting. Actually, it probably *was* slowly rotting away. I was struck with terror. I felt truly scared at my true form. I could understand the second me, who had experienced *Episode Seven* first-hand, for being reticent to exhibit his true self. The overblown image of myself being ‘so beautiful people faint upon seeing me’ was a direct result of this fierce complex.

Also, seeing this made me truly realize how failproof this world was. My three heads were working perfectly to create this world through and through. If Tsushima Takako had never made me go back to Fukui, I would have never attempted to leave my safe space and kept having fun playing with Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest day after day, making love to girls, and solving pointless murders—that is, if I never learned anything nor grew up. However, though deformed, I was obviously a human and therefore evolved. The program installed in my brain was so perfect it seemed to have taken into account this inevitability for me to learn and grow. That’s precisely why I dated girls and solved murders. Dating girls would grant me various experiences. I would also have kids. Solving murders would have me meet all sorts of people. I would also gain real-life experience. I could train my logical-thinking skills. And thinking logically would eventually result in the complete destruction of the delusion program I’d yearned for. It was made to be that way from the get-go. My brain

was programmed to have me grow as a human being through solving murders until I could finally discover my true self. This was a long-term self-destructing program. Well, but only the program would end up destroyed—I would be fine. I would simply leave this world of delusions. That would naturally be the first step in my growth. Something wonderful. ...At least, it should have been.

But I was scared.

I was scared of my true self I'd just gotten a glimpse of. Nobody would accept me for who I was. I was a monster. Nobody would ever love me.

Here, I had people who loved me. People who told me how much they loved me. People who found me handsome. It couldn't get any better. I didn't want to leave. As the second me had said, it would be more satisfying to try living here for as long as possible. I wanted to see how long I could stay with Yuuki. I loved Yuuki. I didn't want to destroy this romance. I wanted to protect it here for as long as I could.

But no!

I was mistaken!

I had forgotten!

"But Tsutomu is here for me," I said. "I'd forgotten about him, eh. He would never call me ugly. I'm sure Tsutomu will continue to love me."

Right. In *Episode One*, only Tsutomu never fainted upon seeing my 'overly-beautiful face.' My face wasn't a problem to him. Maybe he wouldn't see my ugly face as a big deal, even.

"I can't rely on that," the second me said. "I mean, I ran away and left him all alone as a kid, remember? I even lied about visiting him. I escaped and left him crying. I just can't come back to him after all that."

"You can," I said. "We're not the same we used to be back then, are we?"

"Not much has changed," the second me said. "I'm still as ugly."

My true form was visible only when he said things like this. I could see his three heads. One of them was almost dead. That was ugly, sure. A frightful sight. I couldn't blame Seshiru and Serika for not treating me as a human. I could understand why the Katou household kept me locked up in their basement.

"But don't we have Katou-kun too?" I said. "He went to sleep and woke up along with Tsutomu and I. We lived in the same room. Katou-kun must surely love me."

"Katou-kun doesn't love me in the slightest," the second me said. "He merely felt pity towards me. Also, probably some resentment. Otherwise he wouldn't have allowed Seshiru and Serika to have their way with me."

"Resentment? Why would Katou-kun resent me, exactly?"

The second me seemed baffled at how I couldn't understand that, and said, "How could he not?"

However, I didn't get what he meant. Katou-kun had been kind to me. He used to look after me. He'd protected me from Suzuki-kun.

"Do you really not get it?" the second me said. "Hmm, maybe it's because you haven't experienced *Episode Four 1*, *Five 2*, and *Six 1*. You were recently instantiated in *Episode Six* and lack experience."

"What do you mean?"

"That Suzuki-kun loved you the most."

I see, I was about to declare myself convinced upon remembering *Episode One*, but waited on that. "Why would that be? I'm grotesque. Why would Suzuki-kun love me? Why would she yearn for me so strongly? Why, when I'm not even beautiful enough to make others faint?"

The second me shook his head to indicate I was completely off-the-mark.

"Why? Because she's your mother, obviously."

Right, of course. I wasn't 'overly beautiful.' So I must've surprised everyone when I was born, maybe even scared them. They'd probably taken plenty of pictures. The point is, I wouldn't make the people around me faint. So the start of *Episode One* was fake. There's no way

14 people would have tried to kidnap a deformed child. Suzuki-kun was the one who gave birth to me. She was also the one who considered killing me the moment I was born, but didn't and instead took me home. And she was also the one who couldn't help but abuse me once we were home. It's not that Suzuki-kun couldn't feed me milk because I was making her faint; she was simply neglecting me. So she had in fact just failed in her plan to kill me. Her gouging my eyes out and shaving my eyes and ears off was all done out of hatred for me. But she was still my mother and didn't hate me. Despite abusing me and attempting to kill me, she still loved me as her son. That's why I was still alive in spite of all that.

Then who was my father?

I couldn't remember.

I could picture Suzuki-kun's face as she was holding me, but not my father.

I asked the other me, "Who is my father?"

"Who knows," the other me answered. "Shouldn't you think about it and find an answer yourself?"

Did I have to directly ask Suzuki-kun in that jail in Kyoto, I wondered. I reminisced about her. She was pretty. Many men had visited her. But most of them fled upon seeing me. I couldn't really blame them. Suzuki-kun might be a stunner, but finding a three-headed baby lying in her apartment would be shocking to anyone. I was assuredly disturbing Suzuki-kun's romantic life. That was probably the source of Suzuki-kun's anger at me.

Anger.

Suzuki-kun was truly angry at me. She'd gouged my eyeballs out. Remembering the face she was making at the time alone made me feel like a knife was threatening to cut my throat open. My body stiffened. And yet, I loved Suzuki-kun.

Why was that? Why would I love her when she shaved my ear and nose off and gouged my eyes out? Are children destined to love their mother unconditionally?

Hold on, did I *really* love Suzuki-kun?

Suzuki-kun. Slender arms. Tall stature. Big breasts. Long legs. She

leaned forward onto the wheel, put her right hand in the crotch, and said, ‘Phew. I’m all hot in my chest and down there now. My panties are a giant mess inside. You’re just too beautiful, Tsutomu-san. So much it’s scary.’

That was my mother-in-law.

My mother-in-law was Suzuki-kun.

My brain had lied to me yet again. It was treating Suzuki-kun as my non-blood-related mother-in-law. It had done so in *Episode One*, *Five*, *Four*, *Seven*, and was still doing it now in *Episode Six*.

I was genuinely scared of my mother trying to kill me, and so I’d convinced myself that ‘Suzuki-kun’ wasn’t my real mother. I had escaped into falsehood out of fear of being made to drink mercury and have my face botched again.

However, Suzuki-kun wasn’t in *Episode Two* and *Three*. She’d appeared as my girlfriend’s mother in *Episode Five* and *Four*. Why had she drawn closer to me? I’d escaped Kyoto and Fukui in fear of her, so why had I placed Suzuki-kun so close to me?

It was all programmed, I thought.

This had always been a giant trap I’d set up against myself. In the end, me leaving her, dating girls, and making children was all part of my plan to slowly forgive ‘Suzuki-kun.’ After all, Suzuki-kun was my mother and I couldn’t help but love her. But why? She was just my mother? That’s all she was to me! She had been horrible to me, and yet I loved her. Why was that? I even trusted her. I’d entrusted her Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest…I realized, and exploded.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were currently with Suzuki-kun!

They were in the backseat of the red Alfa Romeo driven by Suzuki-kun!

“Let me out of here,” I said. “Right now.”

The other me looked at me, puzzled.

“I’ve let Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest in my mother-in-law’s charge,” I said. “I need to get them back.”

“They will be just fine,” the second me said. “Hasn’t that always been the case?”

Right, I had entrusted my children to Suzuki-kun on many occasions in *Episode Five*, *Four*, and *Seven*. They all trusted her. ‘I’ also trusted Suzuki-kun as my ‘mother-in-law’ back then. But she was Suzuki-kun! The very same one who’d gouged my eyes out before shaving my nose and ears off! She might try to kill Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest just like how she did to me!

I was mistaken. Suzuki-kun had tried to kill me because I was ugly. Because I was so ugly even Suzuki-kun had trouble loving me. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were not. They were my cute triplets. They weren’t ugly like me. So Suzuki-kun (my ‘mother in law’) should love them alright.

These triplets were my imaginary self. I had created them so that Suzuki-kun would love me. But despite being the origin of it, I might’ve felt jealous upon seeing how easy it was for her to love them. I might’ve been jealous of my children for receiving Suzuki-kun’s affection. Maybe I’d grown to hate them, and that’s why I’d left them behind on that riverbank at the start of *Episode Seven*. Had I actually abandoned them by the river because I resented them?

No!

I looked at Yuuki, sleeping next to me.

I felt no hatred towards them. They were my own children. I loved them.

That’s why the original was eating them instead of killing them. He killed his lovers, but devoured his children.

If eating someone means having them become your blood, flesh, and bones—in other words, assimilating them—then yes, I must’ve really loved my children. They were my incarnation to begin with. It was natural for them to become my blood, flesh, and bones.

No. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were my sons. Not me. They had their own personalities. Even if they didn't actually exist.

Suzuki-kun would surely take care of them as my 'mother-in-law,' as their 'grandmother.' I didn't have to worry about that. She wouldn't harm Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.

And yet, she had harmed me. Despite calling me 'Tolerant,' 'Sincere,' and 'Honest,' and supposedly loving me, she had harmed me. She had ruined me.

Why was that? Does being ugly constitute such a big sin? Is it so sinful to be ugly that one has to be punished in that way?

I couldn't understand. No amount of thinking helped me understand. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand what other people were thinking. That's why I wanted to ask her directly.

I wanted to take my phone out of my pocket to call Suzuki-kun, but my arms and legs were sprawled in an X on the bed; my hands couldn't grab it.

"Could you get my phone for me?" I asked. "I want to talk with Suzuki-kun."

The second me thought for a moment before saying, "Sure. I'm sure there's a lot to settle between you two." He then stood up, carrying Tsushima-san, put her to rest on the sofa he was sitting on, and approached me. He unsheathed his katana. The other me also had that rusty sword. He then swung it down and severed the rope binding my right arm. He then stood there, the sword still in hand. I thought while taking my phone out: if I were to do anything suspicious, the other me would kill me on the spot using that sword.

I called Suzuki-kun (my 'mother-in-law'). The phone rang once. I hung up, then redialed. One ring. I hung up. I then redialed one more time. After three rings, my 'mother-in-law' answered. "Yes?" "It's Tsutomu." "Did you find Yuuki?" "Yeah, I did. I'm with her." "Thank god. Let's meet up somewhere then." "Are Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest doing okay?" "Yeah, they're all sleeping on the backseats." "I see." "It sounds like chaos in Chofu, huh. I heard many died. Another Armageddon, maybe?" "Mother-in-law, where are you right now?" "Eh? I'm slowly driving north along Road 8." "Then let's meet up at

the roundabout in front of Sengawa Station." I looked at the other me. He was also staring straight at me. But he didn't show any signs of swinging his sword. "Keep driving around it and don't leave the car until I get there. I will call you again when I get to Sengawa Station and tell you exactly where to go." "Okay. Got it." "I'll be contacting you in the same way, then." "Yeah." It was Suzuki-kun. That was Suzuki-kun's voice. Her tender voice. The voice she used when she was nice to me. I almost called her 'mom' without thinking. But I already called her that sometimes. It shouldn't sound any different than usual. "Yes?" Suzuki-kun said. I wasn't sure how to string my words together. "Thank you very much," I said on the spot. "Ehh? Hah hah, what's taken over you?" What was wrong with me? What was I grateful for? "Don't mention it. Taking care of my grandchildren is the least I can do. I'm still not sure what's going on, but it seems like leaving Chofu was the right choice. Also this is fun to me." No. I hadn't thanked her for looking after Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. I was grateful because she would give my children back to me. ...No, not quite. That wasn't it. This is what I was grateful for:

Thank you for abducting the ugly me and not leaving his side. Thank you for being willing to return to the ugly me's side. The beautiful me both Suzuki-kun and I wished for... My cute triplets that spawned from that wish: Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for returning to the ugly me's side despite having them with you.

"See you later, then," I said before hanging up. Suzuki-kun also said, "See you," and hung up on her side.

The other me was looking down at me, the katana still in hand. I said, "I'm going to Sengawa. First, I'll get Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest back, then I'll talk with Suzuki-kun. I'll lay everything flat."

The other me said, "That might be for the best."

He didn't swing the sword. Of course, because the other me was planning on freeing me, letting me go to Sengawa, and having me lure out the original. That's when he would wield his sword.

Killing the original should impede his ambition of dissolving this world by massacring all his fictitious lovers and erasing the existence

of his fictitious children, meaning this world will remain within the bounds of being *Episode Six* all the way through. I didn't mind the way I was now. I had no qualms with this world being fictitious. I simply wanted to protect those I loved—my wife and children. I wanted to know the truth about those I loved—Suzuki-kun (my 'mother-in-law'). I wanted to confirm the nature of their love. I wanted to know why Suzuki-kun loved the ugly me. I wanted to know why love and abuse were so intermingled.

I untied the ropes binding me with my right hand, then shook Yuuki by her shoulders to wake her up.

"Yuuki, get up," I said. "Let's go see our triplets."

She rubbed her eyes, and suddenly said:

"I love you, Tsutomu. No matter what may happen, no matter how you may be, no matter what you may do, I love you."

Even if I broke this world and rejected Yuuki's existence?

5

The hotel I'd been transported to was called Kokuryo Park, it was situated nearby Kokuryo Station. The other me and Tsushima Takako left first. They would hide themselves, observe me, and ambush the other Tsukumojuuku if he tried to kill Yuuki and the triplets. But I wasn't sure whether protecting me, Yuuki, and the triplets was in the second me's aim. After all, he only loved Tsushima Takako in this world, in *Episode Six*. He'd passed through a tornado in *Episode Seven* and traveled to this world for the sole sake of loving Tsushima Takako. His resolve was steel-hard. And the same applied to the first me, to the original me. He had already beaten six of my lovers to death and erased the existence of 18 of my babies.

On the other hand, my resolve was still quite blurry. I hadn't yet decided whether to accept or to reject this world. If I accepted it, I wouldn't lose my lover and children. I would happily live with Yuuki in *Episode Six 2*, and with Tsushima Takako in *Episode Seven 2*. However, Tsushima Takako had told 'me' to confront the truth in *Episode Seven 1*. If her request of 'returning to her' didn't mean she wanted me to return to her in the fictional world, but to return to the

other her in the real world, I might let down *Episode Seven 1*'s Tsushima Takako by protecting this world. I might betray *Episode Seven 1*'s Tsushima Takako by doing so. That being said, rejecting this world would mean losing Yuuki, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. I would be parting with this tangible love burning in my chest. Even if there was another 'Morimoto Yuuki' in the real world, that still wouldn't be the Morimoto Yuuki I knew. I wasn't sure whether I could feel the same love towards that other Morimoto Yuuki. That's one of the things I simply cannot know until it happens.

Yuuki and I boarded a taxi and headed to Sengawa. I didn't want to run into the original me on the train.

"Tsutomu," Yuuki said, "what are you thinking about?"

I couldn't answer her. But Yuuki knew very well. I was debating on whether I would erase her existence. I was thinking about whether to erase her and our triplets.

"I'll say what's on *my* mind, then," Yuuki said. I felt like covering my ears, but couldn't win against my curiosity. I was yet again trying to neglect thinking for myself. I was trying to have other people tell me the answer.

Pathetic. I was no good.

"Tsutomu," Yuuki said, "you know, I don't mind disappearing."

I felt like killing God. I wanted to kill God for having made Yuuki mouth these words. I wanted to kill God for forcing all of this stupid growth onto me.

I nearly decided to approve of this world. I was about to be set on keeping Yuuki by my side and Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest in my arms.

Hold on, I thought. God might have made Yuuki say that because He knew full-well I would revolt against Him. My object of hatred, God, might've been making me dance on the palm of His hand. So I considered revolting against this revolt and actually rejecting this world. But that double-cross revolt might be what God had anticipated. This wasn't getting anywhere. It was like a dilemma in mystery novels. If the detective starts questioning whether all the

clues they'd found were intentionally left behind by the culprit who had a perfect foresight of their deduction, there's no end to it. Even the detective I was wouldn't get anywhere by constantly suspecting God.

"I also love you, Tsutomu. That's why I don't mind vanishing from this world," Yuuki said. "You know, I can't just detain you here forever."

But I wanted her to keep me here. I loved this world. I loved Yuuki. I loved Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest.

"Also," she said, "this is something Takako-san told me, but we might also exist outside of this fictional world, in the real world. There might be another me, another Takako-san, or other versions of the other girls. I want you to meet someone like that and fall in love with them. Then you should make real children with them."

I felt sick. Having the girl I love tell me to fall in love with other girls, even in a fictional world, was quite painful.

"Tsutomu, don't make that look," she said, touching my face. "I'm saying that because I really love you. I can only say this because I genuinely love you, Tsutomu."

Even so, I was sad. Yuuki was telling me to lose her. She was telling me she would part with me—she would leave me alone.

"I don't want to lose you, Yuuki," I said. "I don't want to lose Tolerant, Sincere, or Honest."

"I know," she said. "But leaving this world doesn't necessarily mean losing me. Nor does it mean losing Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest. You might get to meet me again somewhere else."

"But it's not like we could continue this conversation. That girl wouldn't truly be you."

I stared into Yuuki's eyes.

"That girl's face might look nothing like yours. Her voice might be entirely different too. And there's no way she will..." I said, touching Yuuki's left eyelid, "...have this same pencil-lead scar." The scar Ochii Tadashi had inflicted on her. "That girl wouldn't be you."

Yuuki said, "Thank you, Tsutomu. I'm really glad I got to be loved by you."

No. That's what *I* should be saying.

"I genuinely don't mind whatever happens to me," Yuuki said. "Tsutomu. Please, think for your own sake. Don't think about what would make me happy. Make decisions that benefit you. No matter what you choose, I will love you and support your decision. So please, Tsutomu, promise me: Choose what is truly best for you."

I nodded. "I promise."

"Then I'll tell you my feelings once more, okay?" Yuuki said. "Tsutomu, lose me."

No!

"That's the best thing that can happen to you, Tsutomu."

You're lying!

"I'm not lying about loving you. But I really think you should head back now."

To where?

"West Akatsuki."

I don't want to! Also, there are so many things I still want to accomplish in this world.

"Like what?"

I still have a half-finished tatami...

"Hahah. Are you stupid? Who cares about some tatami!"

Our taxi arrived at Sengawa Station's roundabout. There were long lines of buses and taxis. I got out of our taxi and looked around. The original Tsukumojuuku wasn't anywhere to be seen. Nor was the second Tsukumojuuku. Both of them might have been hiding somewhere. I decided we'd immediately board another taxi if anything were to go down.

I called Suzuki-kun. I hung up upon hearing the first ring twice before redialing and making the call she actually picked up. "Yes?" "It's Tsutomu. I'm at the roundabout on Sengawa. Can you come here?" "I can!" "How long will it take?" "Roughly? Like five minutes." "Okay, we'll be waiting at the roundabout." "Roger." I could hear the triplets laughing behind Suzuki-kun. The call ended. I put the phone away in my back pocket. "Say, Tsutomu," Yuuki said. "What is it?"

“Just, something popped in my mind.” “Go ahead.” “In *Episode Seven*, at the end, ‘Tsukumojuuku’ gets swallowed by the tornado to head to the Diving Throne, right? But I’m thinking, maybe that Divine Throne isn’t in the sky, maybe that was actually the Cross House.”

God was sitting on the throne in heaven. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting; and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal.

The Cross House’s secret cross passage was the throne of God, and the four and twenty rooms surrounding it were the four and twenty seats upon which the four and twenty elders were sitting, and the seven candles surrounding the Great Detective Tsukumojuuku’s corpse were the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, and the stained glass surrounding the chapel was the sea of glass like unto crystal.

So what did it mean? ‘I’ had already reached the Diving Throne in *Episode Seven*. But was God present there? He wasn’t. The secret cross passage was full of dust, nobody had been there. The God sitting on the throne wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

God wasn’t on the throne?

If Yuuki’s idea hit the mark, then what did *Episode Seven* mean? What was God’s absence trying to convey to me? What meaning was there behind that being pointed out to me right now in *Episode Six*?

I thought, but didn’t break through. I didn’t understand, yet thought. I kept thinking. However, Suzuki-kun arrived in her Alfa Romeo before I could figure anything out. Her red Alfa Romeo. Her pure-red Alfa Romeo.

And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne

was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.

A sardine stone. I picked up a pebble on the asphalt and headed towards the Alfa Romeo. I scraped against its hood while it was still moving with the pebble. The red paint peeled off and revealed the foundation. Under the red, the Alfa Romeo was painted in green. Jasper. Emerald. Green.

The Divine Throne.

And round about the throne, were four beasts. And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle.

The triplets were laughing in the back of the Alfa Romeo. Suzuki-kun, in the driving seat, was taken aback. She opened the window on her side and said, "What are you doing, Tsutomu-san? Don't give me a fright. Gee. Look at this bruise on your dad's car."

Dad's car?

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest were singing on the backseats.

"♪ Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come.♪"

'Which was, and is, and is to come.'

Timeslips.

"Mother-in-law," I said. "Who is my father-in-law?"

Suzuki-kun answered. I already knew before she answered.

My dad's name was "Tsukumojuuku, Tsutomu-san. Come on, what's that question?"

I was a perpetual motion machine. At some point in time I had timeslipped, returned all the way back in time, met Suzuki-kun, had sex with her, and conceived myself.

I was my own father and my own son.

The Trinity. Tsukumojuuku. Everything had meaning. Too much meaning. Maybe it was fated to be that way because this was a story. Does this kind of thing never happen in the real world?

"Mother-in-law," I asked, "where is father-in-law?"

"I don't know any better than you," Suzuki-kun said. "One day, he suddenly rose to the sky and left me with the tatami store. Awful, isn't he?"

Suzuki-kun's chest and crotch stirred up whenever she saw my face. I now knew why she loved me despite resenting me, and resented me despite loving me. Suzuki-kun resented me for abandoning her. She also loved me for it. Suzuki-kun loved me for being born to her. She also resented me for it.

I was God.

So I *had* descended from the Divine Throne that was the Cross House down to the Katou house at the base of the mountain. And it made total sense that 'I' couldn't find God in the Divine Throne after returning to the Cross House. There was no way I could. After all, the God 'I' was searching for was myself. No wonder I couldn't find Him anywhere. I had been searching for myself.

Seeing me in a daze, another God came out of the now-red-but-previously-green Alfa Romeo (the throne of God): It was the original Tsukumojuuku who was hiding in the trunk.

Just like the second Tsukumojuuku, the original had lived through *Episode Six 1* and *Seven 1* before coming here, to *Six 2*. So he knew that Morimoto Yuuki was my lover in *Episode Six* way before I did. Or rather, he'd been dating her before me. So of course he knew where Morimoto Yuuki's house was, and knew about the red Alfa Romeo.

The original Tsukumojuuku came out of the trunk, his feet touching the ground. This Tsukumojuuku had the exact same face and body as me. He was overly beautiful. But he was actually repulsive.

When the original Tsukumojuuku showed his face, the other Tsukumojuuku also came out, from the red 7 within the green square —the other Divine Throne—a 7-Eleven.

6

The confrontation of Gods began on Sengawa Station's roundabout.

The original Tsukumojuuku aimed straight for Yuuki, standing in a corner. He swung his katana down. Yuuki was frozen in shock at seeing another me appear out of nowhere. Right when the sword was about to chop her head off, the second Tsukumojuuku slashed at the original Tsukumojuuku with the exact same sword. The original me was cut in half. His torso was severed from one strike. But the original me's sword was also dripping with blood. That blood belonged to Yuuki.

Yuuki's head fell down on the roundabout's ground. The rest of her body was still standing. It fell. Yuuki's head and body were separate. Detached.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The one who screamed was me yet not me.

It wasn't me; it was the original me. Despite being cut in two

above his hips, his upper half stood by itself. His intestines were gushing out from the cut. The original me, using his hands to stand up, was still holding the sword in his hand. He ran on his hands, leaving a trail of organs behind him. The blade noisily scraped against the asphalt. His destination: the Alfa Romeo with Suzuki-kun and my triplets.

The original me was planning on abiding his iron will and killing my children. Killing and devouring them.

I also ran.

Upon seeing the original me get cut in half, Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest had screamed in terror, but when they saw I was still alive and running at them with a sword in hand, they shouted, “Daaad!” Had they yelled because they were sad I got cut in half? Had they done it to rebuke the second me who had sliced him? Had they done it because they wanted the organ-trailing original me to stay away from them? Had they done it to ask me or the other me to get rid of this upper-half that was quickly approaching them? I wasn’t quite sure which it was. Even so, I caught up with the crawling original me and kicked his back from behind. He used the inertia of him rolling on the ground to swing his sword at me. The blade dug into my arm. But it didn’t have enough weight behind it, so it failed to cut through my flesh and bones. I brushed the sword away and kicked the me on the ground again. He said in retaliation, “Stop it! This is also your will! You, the creator of this world, are letting me do this! You’re wishing for this just the same! This is what you want!”

“Hush!” the second me said, decapitating the original me. He stopped talking after becoming a severed head.

“Daaad!” the triplets screamed. “Mooom!”

Yuuki’s head, rolling on the ground, didn’t say anything either.

I would never wish for this to come to pass!

I ran away from the original and the second me—towards Yuuki. Her eyes were closed. Blood was flowing from her neck. That blood

was sullying her face.

Think! I thought.
Think of a way to save Yuuki!

There was nothing I could do! Yuuki had been decapitated! Her head had been chopped off! What solution could I come up with at this point?!

I knew the answer to that! Remember, me! Put that into words! Everything exists within you! It's all within me!
Look attentively!
Look closely at what stands before you!

I looked. When I raised my eyes from Yuuki's beautiful, bloodied face, I saw Suzuki-kun standing right ahead of me. I saw Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest crying and screaming. I saw the red Alfa Romeo they were boarding.

God.

I looked at the sky. It was covered in thick, dark clouds, but there was no tornado. Just thick and dark clouds.

O God!

I yelled, and remembered:
I was this world's God.
To prove that, I would make blood-covered hail rain down.

The first angel sounded, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth.

Vlaaam! Hearing a violent noise, I opened my eyes and behold, crystal-like hail suddenly fell from the sky and hit the ground around me. It hailed upon Sengawa. This hail mingled with the blood of my grief.

That violent noise was thunder; lightning had come down and burned down one of the crape myrtles surrounding the roundabout.

This wasn't a miracle.

It was my doing.

The people in the roundabout panicked at the sudden hail; they escaped and hid under roofs. I stood up in a corner of the roundabout with Yuuki's head in my arms, letting the hail hit my body. I walked towards her body. I fit her head against her severed neck from which blood was gushing out.

She would heal.

Just thinking that was enough for her wound to heal. Her head reconnected to her body and the cut disappeared. The only remaining trace from the sword was the sliver of rust around her neck.

However, Yuuki didn't wake up. Reverting her neck wasn't enough.

I recalled. What I'd said in *Episode Four*: People live for 120 years. Their souls continue to live even when separate from their body. I gave an order:

Yuuki, return to your body of flesh and live for some more inside it.

Yuuki then opened her eyes in my arms.

"Tsutomu? Wait, why are you crying? Huh? What happened? Woah, this hurts, damn. Why is it hailing?"

“Yuuki,” I said. “Let me ask one last time. Should I stay here? Should I leave this place?”

“What?” Yuuki said and laughed. She then hugged me, still under the torrent of hail. “It’s for you to decide, Tsutomu.”

I already knew my answer. I had known it forever.

‘Yuuki (有紀)’ = ‘Yuki (行き)’ = Leave

I had to leave.

7

Yuuki and I took the Alfa Romeo back to the tatami store and took a bath to warm our bodies after the hail. Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest joined us in there, naked.

“Gee, we can’t all fit...” Yuuki complained, laughing. The triplets had leaped into the bathtub half-jokingly, and now we were all stuck inside. “I can’t get out~,” Yuuki laughed, and the triplets started imitating her, humming, “Can’t get out~,” “Can’t get out~.” “Hey, dad’s an expert at wire puzzles,” I said, untangling their arms and legs. I washed them one by one, first their bodies, then their hair. I also did the same for Yuuki. “Woah, mom’s an adult but she’s not washing herself!” Sincere said, so Yuuki told him, “It’s fine, there’s no problem with adults being washed by the person they love.” Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest then barraged us with questions, “Dad, you love mom?” “Mom, you love dad?” “How much do you love her?” etc.

The answer was a given.

When we all left the bath, my mother-in-law had prepared towels for us. They were all white, so when we wrapped them around us, we became the crowd clothed with white robes.

“Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and

unto the Lamb."

"Amen. Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen."

While Yuuki was dressing the triplets, I headed to the kitchen. My mother-in-law was preparing dinner. She looked at me and said, "Oh my, Tsutomu-san, please put on some clothes. You will catch a cold like this."

"Mother-in-law," I said, "what kind of person was my father-in-law?"

"What is it, so suddenly?"

"I want to know."

"But Tsutomu-san, don't you already know? I've told you many times."

"I want to hear it one more time."

"Heh. Fine. Your father, you see, was a handsome and kind man. He was really smart, he even worked as a great detective. It really was a shame to have him fix tatami mats."

"He was handsome?"

"Yes, absolutely. I wish you could've seen him."

"Handsome enough to make your chest and crotch burn up?"

"Oh, please, Tsutomu-san, don't word it like that. Want me to tell Yuuki about it?"

"Didn't he have three heads?"

"Huh? Hah hah hah. Why would he? Of course not. Ah, but he really liked the expression, 'three make for Manjushri's wisdom.' He must have derived some weird meaning from his name Tsukumojuuku. He was a big fan of wordplays, you see."

"..."

"Still, that's ultimately wordplay. Nothing more. He naturally only had one head. He was just a bit too smart and eccentric. He even called himself God. Again, that's mere wordplay. He came up with lots

of readings of his name."

"The Trinity, right?"

9 + 9 + 9 = 2 + 7 = 9

"No, no," she said, taking me aback. "You see, the digit 9 is a close cousin to the greek letter α, while 10 is one to Ω. He used to say this all the time: 'I am the alpha and the omega.' This is what God said, isn't it? So his name, composed of nines and tens, is apparently God's name. Hah hah."

First, there were words. They existed alongside God. Words are God. If the Gospel of John was right, then 'Tsukumojuuku' would indeed be the most apt name to represent God's name.

That being said, was I God?

Did I know everything?

No, the world was full of things I didn't know. I wasn't even aware of that interpretation just now. It was *my* name, and something *I* had come up with, but I didn't even know that.

But hold on, I thought. I had just heard that interpretation. Wouldn't I pass through another wormhole in the future and ultimately tell Suzuki-kun about it as though I'd come up with it myself?

What is fate? What is set in stone? If I was the God of this world, what exactly was I deciding? Maybe things just existed one way, independent of anyone's will, like that interpretation of 九十九十九 = 9 10 9 10 9 = α Ω α Ω α, and anyone calling themselves God was merely claiming that everything was their doing.

Maybe the miracle from earlier in Sengawa was a natural occurrence that was bound to happen from the very start, and Yuuki's head was just shaped in the right way to reconnect itself. And although I acted like I was responsible for all of it, I was under a terrible misunderstanding; I was merely one of the many pawns manipulated to make this predestined miracle occur.

Or maybe there was an actual God out there who was making me act like one?

Well, it's not like I could reach a conclusion on that. To repeat my

point: one can suspect the existence of a criminal foreseeing the detective's deduction all they want. There's no end to it.

There was lotus tempura and boiled pork with vinegar miso on the menu tonight. It looked amazing. But I had to head to West Akatsuki before eating or I might not be able to leave. Thinking so, I was about to tell my mother-in-law, "I won't be needing dinner," but then remembered 'my' regrets at the end of *Episode Seven*, and changed my mind.

I *would* have a nice dinner. I would take my time with Yuuki, Tolerant, Sincere, Honest, and my mother-in-law.

I had made up my mind to go back to West Akatsuki. But if seeing Yuuki and our triplets' faces made it hard for me to leave and I ultimately gave up on going back to West Akatsuki, then so be it.

I had already made my decision, but changing that is equally a decision. I wouldn't allow any complaints. I was God. I might very well be a sham claiming to be God, but I could go down that road forever, so I just decided that yes, I was God.

We frolicked around while eating dinner. It was really fun. The second me might have been eating dinner with Tsushima Takako as well. He must have been having fun too. Maybe other mes were also eating somewhere else. I wished them the best. It was a shame the original me couldn't eat. So here, I made a decision. I would have Tsutomu = Daibakushou Curry find the original me's corpse I had hidden away. That corpse had been cut in half, its organs emptied, and inside it...the 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' novels inserted. *Episode One*, *Two*, *Three*, *Five*, *Four*, *Seven*, as well as the current one, *Episode Six*. I made a miracle happen and sewed back the original Tsukumojuuku's stomach with the 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' novels inside. Without even using needles or strings. Cleanly. Smoothly. That created the mystery of why and how there were novels inside Tsukumojuuku's stomach. I would have Tsutomu solve that however he saw fit. It would all become self-evident once he read the 'Seiryouin Ryuusui' novels.

However, the culprit was ‘Tsukumojuuku,’ and that ‘Tsukumojuuku’ was dead. Hah hah hah.

Would Tsutomu solve this one?

I was a bit worried, but well, if worst came to worst, I could become his assistant.

Then I needed another name.

What would be good?

Thinking so, I recalled his assistant crushed by the steel ball in *Episode Seven*. His name was, I think, Sugano Takuya = Daibakushou Happy II; I just had to make sure I chose something else.

That might’ve been a close one. There’s no guarantee God won’t be killed at any time. I had to be careful.

Right as I was thinking that, Igura-kun attacked my foot under my chair.

“Ouch ouch ouch!”

I’d forgotten to feed him.

Tolerant, Sincere, and Honest burst in laughter at me. Yuuki laughed too. So did my mother-in-law. Even I was laughing. I was having so much fun. I really wasn’t sure I was capable of leaving.

So for now, I would transform this instant into an eternity. I would use God’s concentration to fractionate the duration left. During this instantaneous eternity, I would be Achilles unable to overtake the tortoise.

Notes

[←1]

A form of the predominantly-comedic storytelling art proper to the Kansai region.

[←2]

Umi's name (海) literally means sea/ocean.